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Claremont McKenna College

**The Differentiating Personal and Tactical Dimensions of Head Coaches in the NFL:  
Why is Bill Belichick Successful When Others Are Not?**

Submitted to  
Professor Jay Conger, D.B.A.

By  
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For  
Senior Thesis  
Fall 2016  
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## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	3
A Brief History .....	4
Why Coaching Matters .....	6
Changes in Coaching .....	8
The Differentiating Personal Dimensions of the Coaches Themselves .....	13
Coach-Player Relationships .....	15
Role Models .....	22
The Differentiating Tactical Dimensions of Their Coaching Methods .....	32
Signing and Trading Players .....	34
Team Management, Preparation, Assessment and Strategy .....	42
Game Tactics .....	47
Management of Assistant Coaches and the Front Office .....	50
The Differentiating Factors between Bill Belichick and Other NFL Coaches Today .....	53
Personality and Attitude .....	58
The System .....	64
Coach-Quarterback Relationship .....	68
Conclusion .....	71
References .....	78
Appendix .....	83

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Why is Bill Belichick Successful When Others Are Not?

Patrick J. Dixon

Claremont McKenna College

### Abstract

Throughout the history of the NFL, several head coaches have found significantly more success than their peers. The purpose of this paper is to provide a better understanding of what personal and tactical dimensions have set these coaches apart. This paper will study the most successful coaches of the past, as well as today's most successful coach, Bill Belichick. Through case studies, this paper identifies possible explanation for Belichick's current run of success in an NFL that grows more competitive each season. Specifically, this paper looks at the relationship between players and coaches, and how Leader-Member exchange plays a very important role in the success coaches will find. Leader-member exchange (LMX) has not been studied in the NFL, and this paper predicts that future research in this area will find the most important factors of LMX to be trust, respect, and predictability of actions. This paper also looks at the role of the head coach outside of his player relationships, and how vast football knowledge is not enough to lead an NFL team to success. Head coaches that are most successful differentiate themselves from others through the tactical side of the game, in many different aspects, including player acquisition, game preparation and tactics, personnel management and decision-making. Last, this paper examines the coaching career of Bill Belichick, and why he has found immense success in the NFL. Further research in the field of player-coach relationships would provide a clearer answer for successful coaches in the NFL.

*Keywords:* NFL coaches, coach-player relationships, Bill Belichick

## The Differentiating Personal and Tactical Dimensions of Head Coaches in the NFL:

### Why is Bill Belichick Successful When Others Are Not?

#### **Introduction**

There have been many incredibly successful head coaches throughout the history of professional football in the US. The goal of this thesis is to better understand the differentiating personal and tactical dimensions which separate successful head coaches from unsuccessful head coaches in the National Football League (NFL). On a personal level, coaches must have positive relationships with their players in order to garner the respect from their players that is needed to successfully coach a team of elite athletes. Aside from this positive relationship, most of the highly successful coaches in NFL history have acted as role models. Confidence and an industrious work ethic are just two examples of behaviors which the best head coaches model for their players on a daily basis. Paired with the respect that comes from a positive player-coach relationship, the impact of role modeled behaviors can greatly influence the mindset of an entire NFL team. Tactically, many coaches have been brilliant with football scheme and innovation of the game. The best football minds have been able to put together a roster of the right players and teach those players their brilliant scheme and tactics well enough for the team to be successful. At the same time, the best coaches must be able to surround themselves with the right people to get all of this done. Hiring the right assistant coaches and teaching those people how the team runs is a huge responsibility of the head coach, and one which is critical in the grand scheme of a team's success. Without the ability of a head coach to master the critical personal and tactical dimensions which successful

coaches before they have already proven to work, that coach will not be able to find consistent success in the NFL.

The following sections of the introduction will provide a brief history of the NFL going back to its early beginnings, a basis upon which it can be argued that coaching is the most consequential factor in a team's success in the NFL, and an explanation of how the NFL has changed and how that impacts both players and coaches in their quests for success.

### **A Brief History**

Football in the United States began as early as the late 1800's, originally as a modified version of rugby and soccer ("History of Football"). The first version of the sport that would be easily recognizable to someone today didn't exist until the turn of the century. In 1920, the American Professional Football Association (APFA) was created in Canton, Ohio to serve as the governing body to create uniform rules to be followed by each team within the new league. The APFA changed its name to the National Football League (NFL) in 1922 ("History of Football"). The NFL Draft did not begin until 1936. Football's popularity and stability had not yet come into play however, and unlike today, many players who were drafted chose another career to pursue upon graduating from college ("History of Football"). In its early years, football was "a precarious business investment" (McCaskey 5). Unlike the NFL today, which is projected to rake in over \$13 billion in revenue in 2016, the early professional teams sometimes struggled to come up with money to pay their players (Belzer; McCaskey 92). Former Chicago Bears coach, tight end, and Hall of Famer Mike Ditka spoke in an interview with ESPN's Kevin Stone



about Bears founder George Halas, saying, “He’s the founder of the National Football League, no matter how you look at it. Guys like George Halas and Art Rooney and Tim Mara, they started out and persevered... You don’t have a game of football if you don’t have those pioneers. There were a lot of lean years.” Many of the “fathers” of the NFL, like George Halas, were player-coaches of the same teams for which they might also have been owners (“History of Football”). Despite its risky start, the NFL grew in popularity, size, and profits as the league continued to capture more and more of the public’s attention (“History of Football”).

In 1966, the NFL agreed to merge with the American Football League (AFL) to create the version of the NFL the world knows today. Over the last 96 seasons of professional football there have been many different teams, however some have been more dominant than others. Though the Super Bowl wasn’t until 1967, championship teams have been named every year since the Akron Pro’s had the only undefeated season in 1920 (“History of Football”). Since then, only 10 coaches have won 3 or more championships. These coaches are George Halas, Guy Chamberlin, Curly Lambeau, Paul Brown, Weeb Ewbank, Vince Lombardi, Chuck Noll, Bill Walsh, Joe Gibbs, and Bill Belichick (McCaskey 391). Several other coaches have won 2 or more championships, including Tom Landry, Don Shula, Bill Parcells, Jimmy Johnson, and Tom Coughlin (McCaskey 392). 23 coaches are responsible for 67 of the total 96 championships ever won (McCaskey) To put this into perspective, there have been 483 NFL coaches (“Pro Football Reference”). Since winning multiple championships is so rare and difficult to do, these coaches are widely considered the best professional football coaches there have ever been (“History of Football”). Most football critics agree on who the greatest coaches

in NFL history have been (“Greatest Coaches in NFL History”), and so this thesis will frequently reference examples from these coaches’ lives and careers. The first 2 chapters of this thesis look specifically at the personal and tactical dimensions of these coaches through case studies, hoping to understand what qualities have made these men successful in the NFL. The only current coach who has won more than 2 Super Bowl championships is Bill Belichick (Super Bowl wins in 2001, 2003, 2004, and 2014), head coach of the New England Patriots (McCaskey 380-381). Because he is the only coach to find this amount of success since Chuck Noll retired in 1991, the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of this thesis will be a case study examining Bill Belichick and his career, with the goal of uncovering why he has found so much success in the NFL.

### **Why Coaching Matters**

There are many different dimensions which contribute to a team’s performance. These can include everything from the owners, coaches, scouts, trainers, and players, to the fans, weather, field conditions and location of a game. Despite all these factors that may impact the outcome of a game, the most pivotal factor is the head coach. In 2003, Brad Adler published his book, *Coaching Matters*, which thoroughly examines who Adler considers to be the best 10 coaches up to that time. By examining many details of these coaches’ careers, Adler comes to the conclusion that coaching is the most consequential factor involved in an NFL team’s success (307). It is oftentimes easy for fans of the sport to claim that a team is only successful because of their star quarterback, or the team’s ownership, or “luck” the team had throughout the season. Adler disproves all claims that the coach wasn’t the most important factor in the team’s success through

multiple case studies throughout the NFL's history (310, 313, 332). Alongside Adler's research on the subject is research done by Michael Schotthey which examines parity in the NFL. According to Schotthey, the NFL is the most competitive league in all of sports because of the NFL Draft system, a hard salary cap, and revenue sharing. The NFL Draft awards the worst team in the league the first pick in the Draft the following year, ultimately allowing them the opportunity to improve most because they get to pick the best player for their team before anyone else. Likewise, the team that wins the Super Bowl will draft last (32<sup>nd</sup>), putting them at a disadvantage to the rest of the NFL's teams. Through this system, the NFL has been able to somewhat regulate the amount of talent each team is able to hold each year (Schotthey). The hard salary cap in the NFL does something very similar. By not allowing teams to spend risky amounts of cash to attract the best players, the NFL has essentially limited each team to a similar number of "star players" who want high-paying contracts. This salary cap is also an attempt at blocking dynasties. Successful players want to be paid large amounts of money that correspond with the amount of success they believe they helped bring to the team. With a hard salary cap, these successful teams are unable to please all the great players who have grown on their roster, opening up the window for less successful teams to pay these players a salary that they desire (Schotthey). It is because of the NFL's revenue sharing policy that these less successful teams are able to do this. Each NFL team is guaranteed roughly the same portion of revenue, which allows them all to remain competitive financially (Schotthey). Without revenue sharing, small market teams such as the New Orleans Saints would never be able to match the financial strength of a team like the New York Giants. Because of these three factors built into the NFL's structure, the talent of the players on each team

is as equal as a league can maintain without major interference. In combining the parity of the NFL today with the Adler's research on the importance of coaching in the NFL, I firmly believe that head coaches in the NFL are the greatest reason for each team's success.

### **Changes in Coaching**

Over the NFL's lifetime of nearly 100 years, the role of the head coach has never changed. The head coach's job is to win games. Something which has changed is the way the head coach has gone about achieving this goal. Originally, the NFL's head coaches were player-coaches (McCaskey 1, 53, 79). Because the NFL was considered a risky business at the time, most team owners couldn't afford to pay both coaches and players. These player-coaches were in charge of organizing their teams, scheduling games, and designing plays and teaching them to their teammates as well as they could, while maintaining their own physical ability to play. A few of the best player-coaches were George Halas, Guy Chamberlin, and Curly Lambeau. Each of these player-coaches found success despite the fact that they had a double-role within their franchise. As time went on and the NFL changed, it became incredibly unreasonable to expect a player to maintain the physical conditioning necessary to play in the NFL while simultaneously managing and coaching an entire football team.

Since the time of "player-coaches", there have been several distinct time periods during which several coaches have thrived more than others. From 1920 to 1968, there are 6 coaches who won 3 or more championships (McCaskey 391). George Halas was instrumental to the founding and development of the NFL (Kienzler). Vince Lombardi

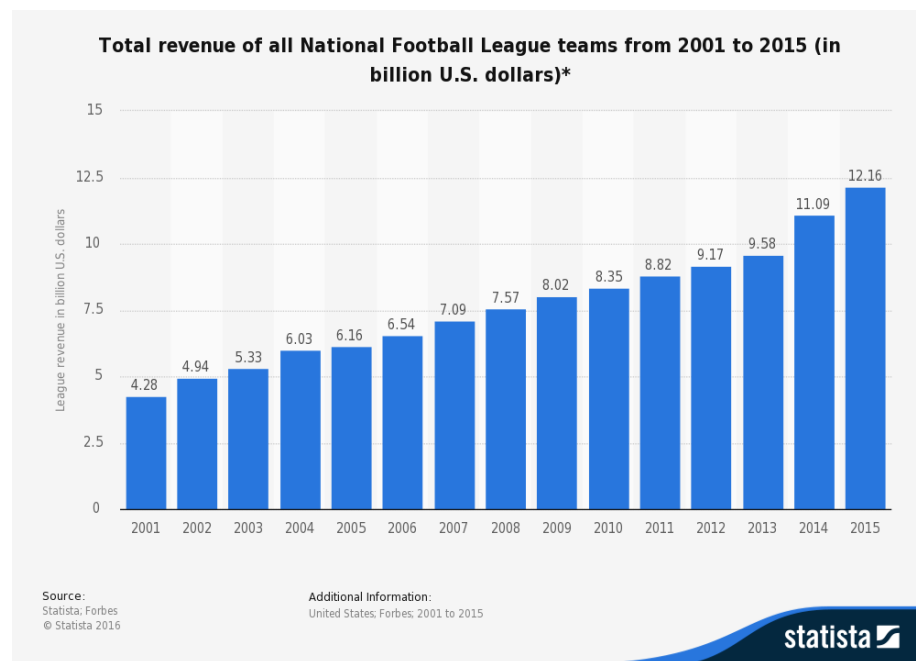
was to coaching football what Halas was to the NFL. Lombardi never strayed from his ultimate goal of winning games. However, Lombardi changed how coaches would from that point on would go about achieving success on the field. Lombardi combined the military style of disciplinarian coaches more typically used in the past with the motivational styles of new coaches (McCaskey 205). This combination was not revolutionary, but no one had found so much success as Lombardi using it. In just 10 years of coaching, Lombardi won 5 championships (McCaskey 391). Since Lombardi, most coaches understand the importance of not only teaching their players the details of the game, but also understanding their players on a personal level in order to leverage every ounce of effort those players can give to their team.

The 1970's and 1980's mark the "modern era" of the NFL, which has been defined greatly by football's importance as a part of America's culture. Millions of Americans watch football every year, and coaches like Bill Walsh and Chuck Noll were some of the first to be able to capture the attention of viewers more than other team with their success. Walsh, dominant coach of the 1970's with the San Francisco 49ers, was one of the first coaches to integrate the Lombardi coaching style with a new offensive scheme, the West Coast Offense. Walsh set the bar high for future NFL coaches. Since then, football scheme and tactics have grown more and more complicated every year. Coaches with the ability to master and teach these complex schemes while also connecting with their players have been the most successful, though none more than Bill Belichick. Belichick's mastery of these two vitally important aspects of coaching professional football have made him the most successful coach of his generation. In today's NFL, which is cluttered with "superstar" players, no coaches have been able to

find the kind of consistent success Belichick has found in New England. As of Week 12 of the 2016 NFL season, the New England Patriots have not had a losing season since 2000 (“Game Notes”). This ties the Patriots for the 2<sup>nd</sup> longest winning season streak of all time in the NFL with San Francisco (1983-1998) and Oakland (1965-1980) (“Game Notes”).

Another changing aspect of the game has to do with the amount of money and talent the NFL has attracted in the past several decades. The increases in both NFL revenue and athlete talent play a large role in changes to coaching. The NFL has seen rapidly increasing revenues each year. As is seen in the graph below, the total revenue of the NFL has increased by \$7.88 billion in the last 14 years.

Figure 1.



Source: Forbes. "Total Revenue of All National Football League Teams from 2001 to 2015 (in Billion U.S. Dollars) \*." *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. Statista. September 2016. Web. 28 Nov 2016.

\*Note: Total NFL revenue is calculated from each of the 32 team revenues.

The amount of revenue the NFL brings in is a direct reflection of the popularity the NFL has gained. A huge part of this has to do with incredibly large television rights contracts which have been growing each year (Belzer). Because of such high revenue, stakes have also become much higher. Some of the stakeholders in the NFL today are: the fans who pay for access to view games as well as for merchandise and other goods, the television networks who pay large sums of money to the NFL to be granted rights to broadcast NFL games, the owners of each team who are making money based on the success of the NFL in terms of profits made, the players who are paid 47-48% of the NFL's total revenue each year as is stated in the NFL's collective bargaining agreement (Belzer), the coaches whose jobs are on the line if they do not produce a winning team (or possibly a winning team, but not to the satisfaction of the team's owner), and executives within the NFL itself who have become incredibly wealthy because of the profitability of all the other stakeholders. Because of the increased pressure on each of the potential revenue earning stakeholders in the NFL, head coaches and players are always the first people to be fired when a team is unsuccessful. With so much potential revenue riding on the ability of the head coach to produce winning seasons, hiring a head coach has become a multi-million-dollar decision for ownership to make. If the owner(s) of each team understood what differentiates a great head coach from the rest, that owner would be placing their franchise in an advantageous position to be successful in the future.

As the revenue in the NFL rises, more and more talent is drawn to professional football. When the NFL began, almost every player had a "real job" upon which they relied for sustainable income. Players in the NFL in the 1920's earned next to nothing compared to what players earn today ("Evolution of the NFL Player"). It was not really

until the 1970's, when football surpassed baseball as the nation's favorite sport, that revenue in the NFL became great enough to lure players away from other jobs in their spare time to become full-time professional football players ("Evolution of the NFL Player"). In the US today, the best athletes are filtered through several levels of football before they get a shot at the NFL, and even then, less than 1% of college players will ever land on a professional football roster ("Evolution of the NFL Player"). With such an increase in talent, head coaches are given a great amount of responsibility to mold this talent together to create championship teams. The best coaches are the ones who have been able to do this multiple times.

This thesis is organized into 3 chapters. The first chapter, The Differentiating Personal Dimensions of the Coaches Themselves, focuses on the personal qualities of the head coach that set them apart from their competition and how these qualities affect the relationship between the coach and each player. The head coach acting as a role model of valuable behaviors is critical. The second chapter, The Differentiating Tactical Dimensions of Their Coaching Methods, examines the many responsibilities and roles head coaches have had to take on throughout the history of the NFL, and how exceptionally high ability to perform specific aspects of the job leads certain coaches' teams to much higher rates of success. This chapter identifies the specific job functions which are vital to the coach's success, which include several aspects of actual coaching, building the right team each year, and managing the people surrounding them (assistants, owners, etc...). The third chapter of this thesis, The Differentiating Factors between Bill Belichick and Other NFL's Coaches Today, looks at a specific case study of Bill Belichick, identifying what about his personal qualities and coaching qualities sets him



apart from every other active NFL coach. Belichick's success has been paralleled by few in NFL history, and with his entrance into the discussion of the greatest coaches of all time, it is necessary to understand his time with the New England Patriots in order to grasp what it takes to consistently win in the NFL today.

### **The Differentiating Personal Dimensions of the Coaches Themselves**

The relationship between a coach and their players is an intense and highly interpersonal one, and therefore the personality of the coach can have a profound impact on the players. As in most careers, the relationships between head coach and players is one similar to that of a boss and his employees. In every career there are differing degrees to how important this relationship is. In an advertising firm, for example, the manager within the office may have limited relationships with his or her employees, or he or she may have very close relationships with them. Within the game of football however, a significantly more intense and personal relationship is created between players and coaches. The similarities and differences detailed below show exactly why the relationships between coaches and players in the NFL can be somewhat understood by psychological literature. However, the differences, which will be discussed below, will be great enough that coach-player relationship must be examined through a different lens than that which psychologists examine boss-employee relationships.

There are some similarities between being the head coach of an NFL team and being a traditional "boss" in an office, for example. In both cases, both people are typically expected to lead the group down a successful path. Both the coach and the boss are also hoping to maximize the abilities of their employees in order to better their team

or company as a whole, and so both people will want to leverage their relationship with their employees in order to get the most out of them. This is where being a head coach in the NFL becomes incredibly different from being a more traditional boss. The relationship which these coaches have with their players is so much deeper that the coach has much more leverage than the average traditional boss.

The differences in the relationship are numerous, but the most important of them involve the amount of time spent together, the direct tie between the coach's ability to teach and the players ability to execute on the field, and physical nature of the task at hand which bonds people together. In a traditional office job, employees oftentimes do not see their boss on a daily basis, let alone speak with them. In the NFL however, and in football at all levels, the head coach is visible to his players a majority of the time, and he spends a good amount of that time talking directly to his players and assistant coaches. The visibility and constant contact in this relationship intensify almost all aspects of the relationship itself. Another reason why the player-coach relationship might be more intense is that for at least 16 weeks, the head coach and players endure a 3 to 4-hour contest at the highest level of athletic performance and physical contact in the world, and they rely on each other to act correctly in order for the group as a whole to come out of that competition successful. Lastly, there is an aspect of trust in the relationship between coach and player which affects them both. The coach has given assignments to each player and must trust them to execute those assignments. Failure to execute is oftentimes blamed on the coach and is given as a reason for them being fired. On each play of the game, players must have complete trust that what their coach is telling them to do will be what is best for the team. They also have to trust that their coach to prepare them

properly. In a game as violent and dangerous as football, players are trusting their coaches and teammates with their own health on the field, and need to have confidence that everyone is going to do their job. On top of their health and job security, the NFL is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and mistakes made by players can cost both coaches and players millions of dollars. Another reason that the relationship between coaches and players is so intense is because of the stardom involved in playing professional football today. When millions of people may love or hate you because of your performance during games each week, there is another level of importance to execute well added to the equation. Because of all this, the intensity of the relationship between the head coach and players is very frequently going to be much higher than that of a traditional boss-subordinate relationship.

### **Coach-Player Relationships**

To understand the relationship between the coaches and their players, it is helpful to turn to the leadership research literature. One particular theory provides insights into how leader-member exchange (LMX) theory describes “the dyadic process by which roles and expectations are developed for a leader with each subordinate” (Yukl, et al). Research in 1997 by Gerstner and Day found that LMX “was correlated positively with subordinate performance, satisfaction and supervision, overall job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and role clarity” (Yukl, et al). Based on this research, the overall success of the team should be improved if there is high LMX within the team. Other research by Graen and Uhl-Bien proposed that it is best for the group’s success when the leader attempts to create and develop high LMX with as many subordinates as

possible. On a football team, this would mean that the head coach makes an effort to get to know each one of his players in order to develop high leader-member exchange. If the head coach is able to develop this relationship in which both the coach (as the leader) and the player (as the follower) have a strong understanding of what is expected of them, the team should, in theory, have greater potential to become more successful than if there were low levels of LMX on a team. One way in which this would display itself on an NFL team would be if the coach regularly spoke with each player about their performance on the field and what he wants them to focus on improving. Another way in which high LMX could develop is if the head coach were open to his players reporting back to him regularly with their own thoughts on what the team was doing. Both of these examples would help players and coaches understand the expectations of each other, which can only help an NFL team, where clear communication between coaches and players is so crucial. Coaches regularly give copious amounts of feedback to their players in regards to their performance. On an NFL team with an outstanding coach, daily feedback after practice and games would be encouraged by the coach so that players would feel the ability to voice their opinions or concerns with both the offensive and defensive coordinators, as well as the head coach.

One example of a head coach who displayed very high levels of LMX on his team is Vince Lombardi with the Green Bay Packers. Lombardi made it very clear on a daily basis what he expected from his players. Lombardi never allowed a player to get by on a lack-luster effort. Players on Lombardi's roster knew that their role was to block, tackle, and work harder than everyone else in the NFL (McCaskey 199-200). Another excellent example of high LMX displayed comes from Weeb Ewbank's Baltimore Colts team in

the late 1950's and his New York Jets team in the 1960's. Ewbank coached both Johnny Unitas and Joe Namath to Super Bowl championships, despite the fact that these two quarterbacks could not be more different. Managing quarterbacks can oftentimes be difficult for head coaches, however Ewbank seemed to have the perfect recipe for these two. A large part of that may be attributed to the fact that Ewbank was an amazing coach with similarities to those of Paul Brown. However, unlike Brown, Ewbank was incredibly at ease around his players, and openly allowed his players to express to him their opinions. This type of relationship fosters high LMX, and may have helped contribute to the Colts and Jets successes.

Yukl says that "high-exchange relationships are characterized by high-level of trust, liking, and respect, and they involve expectations of mutual exchange. The leader provides outcomes desired by subordinates, such as interesting tasks, additional responsibilities, and larger rewards." Nearly all coaches in the NFL today offer their players "performance-based bonuses" which make it very clear to players what the expectation of the coach is, and exactly how much value the coach puts on the player achieving that goal. Yukl goes on to say that in "exchange for these desired outcomes, the subordinates are expected to be committed to the work and loyal to the leader." While this research on the "average" workplace does share some similarities with the NFL workplace, I do not think that "liking" is as important a factor as respect, for example. Many coaches, like Paul Brown and Bill Belichick, were not liked by their players nearly as much as they were respected by their players. Both men's consistent treatment of players earned the respect of their teams, even if some veteran or "star" players wanted special treatment (McCaskey 115, 350). Because of the physically violent nature of

football, it may be that high-exchange relationships come more from high levels of discipline, players and coaches trusting each other, and both the player and coach's desires for the player to be an extraordinary performer on the field. Trust has been seen to hold much more value in increasing LMX in the Patriots franchise under coach Bill Belichick. Rodney Harrison, former Patriots player, recalled how "miserable" it was to go into meetings the day after a loss because Belichick was so critical of his players (Orr). However, the Patriots players trusted their coach enough to know that he would do everything he could each week to prepare them to succeed. Belichick has high LMX with his quarterback, Tom Brady who has role clarity and is committed to the organization's success, as Yukl's theory suggests. This high level of LMX brings itself to life in this quote from Tom Brady on preparation: "The games are won by what you do over the course of the week and how you go about your preparation so that you can be prepared for the game on Sunday" (Glauber). Brady speaks clearly of his team's need to prepare in order to be successful in almost the exact way which Belichick would discuss the subject. The highest levels of LMX on teams bring out the greatest amount of understanding there can be between coaches and their players.

There are several key dimensions which are responsible for high levels of LMX. These dimensions are a conditional love from the coach, the setting of very high expectations by the coach out of belief that the players have greater potential than they believe themselves, and a deep respect that is developed by hard work and performance-based rewards. One key reason for high-exchange relationships on an NFL team could be that many of the great coaches love their players. The bond created between a player and coach seems to be significantly stronger when the coach is very hard on his players,

driving them to greater successes than the player may have ever thought possible. When a coach “takes it easy” on his players, refusing to discipline them in order to teach them and make them better football players, their players may respect them less. The players may also feel that the coach’s lack of disciplining his players is because the coach doesn’t see great potential in his players. McCaskey describes Vince Lombardi, possibly the greatest coach of all time, as being like a teacher who is incredibly tough on his students, always correcting them when they fail (205). What set Lombardi apart from many was that fact that he was also the type of teacher who would cry on graduation day as he saw the success of his hard-working students be finally realized.

Respect also plays a huge part in the degree to which there is LMX on a team. All of the great coaches in NFL history have demanded respect from their players, though almost none of them would have ever had to ask for that respect. Respect in the NFL is earned by coaches through hard work, success, displaying high character, and being fair. Early on in their coaching careers, great coaches like Halas, Chamberlin and Lambeau earned the respect of their teammates and players because they had the distinct reality of being both a player and coach. These men were also known to be the most competitive, hard working men within the organization. I do not believe that this has changed much over the last 96 years. Many of the most respected coaches have been the hardest workers within their organization, setting an example and precedent for the players. Lombardi’s relentless teaching and discipline on the football field set an example for the Packers which earned him great respect from each of his players. This willingness to work as hard as it took to succeed, paired with coaching talent, is many times in the NFL what seems to make players respect their coaches. Curly Lambeau is an excellent example of a coach

who may not have treated his players quite as nicely as they may have hoped, yet they respected him because he was able to motivate his men, train them, and lead them to great successes in Green Bay, despite the difficulties of playing in a near-frozen, small town in Wisconsin.

Earning the respect of all your players as a head coach is difficult enough without superstars on a team. As the NFL has grown, there have been more and more superstars throughout the league. A perfect example of how a star player's lack of respect for the head coach hurt a team is Brandon Marshall during the 2009 season (de la Rosa). Marshall felt that a player of his caliber should be paid much more than his contract indicated. In completely disrespectful and rebellious behavior towards head coach Josh McDaniels, Marshall "refused to run in team drills, punted footballs across the field, and purposely batted down passes." He also sat out of team drills because he did not know the playbook he was given to study (de la Rosa). Disrespect towards the coaches by prima donnas like Marshall can be detrimental to an NFL team's season, as it was to Marshall's Denver Broncos team in 2009 (did not make the playoffs). Because coaches recognize that increasing player performance should earn them more money, players are given raises in salary amounts nearly every year. The average salary for an NFL player is \$1.9 million per year, and the average salary of a head coach in the NFL is \$4.85 million per year. Yet despite the averages, Baltimore Ravens head coach John Harbaugh makes \$7,000,000 per year, while his star quarterback Joe Flacco makes \$29,000,000 per year. It can be hard to treat all players fairly when one player on your team makes \$22,000,000 more than even you, as coach, earn in a year (NFL 2016 Player Salaries). Many coaches have found great success with their players when they treat them fairly. By fairly, this



means that the players are all treated equally. If a rookie and a star veteran player make the same mistake, the fair action by the coach is to critique, punish, and address both players the exact same way. If a rookie backup quarterback has to run sprints after practice for every interception he throws that day, the veteran starting quarterback should be treated exactly the same way. As soon as prima donna players are treated differently, they often times will walk all over coaches. Star players sometimes have objections to this equal treatment, but it creates a stronger team environment in the locker room when all players feel that their coach will treat them fairly, even if they're a player making a small percentage of their quarterback's salary. Coaches like Bill Belichick treat their players fairly, letting each of them know that he expects excellent effort and execution from each of them equally, regardless of where they're from or how talented they may be (McCaskey 350). Lombardi is another example of a coach who ensured that his players were treated fairly not only by himself, but by their teammates. Lombardi taught players to pursue excellence not only in football, but also in their personal lives as well. This meant that in Lombardi's locker room and on the field, all players were to be treated equally (McCaskey 205). This fairness led his players to know that Lombardi was a man they could trust. As was mentioned earlier, Yukl tells us that high-exchange relationships are characterized by high levels of trust.

"Expectations of mutual exchange" is another characteristic of a relationship with high LMX. Mutual exchange on the football field can express itself in many different actions or words. The ability to motivate is something that all good coaches must have. By motivating their players, coaches are giving the players something to think about which helps them perform. In exchange, the players should be able to use that motivation

to perform at their highest level. Many fans of the sport typically imagine that NFL coaches are incredible, motivational speakers who give loud, emotional pre-game speeches to their players in order to get them inspired to play the game. Contrary to this belief, most of the great coaches are not well known for “exciting” pre-game speeches. They are not “rah, rah” coaches. The great coaches are constantly driving their players to greatness in the difficulty of practice, so that when the game was played, they do nothing other than play exactly as they had practiced, and no pre-game motivational speech is needed. The list of names goes on and on of coaches who told their players to play hard, and “do your job”, as Belichick says (McCaskey 350). Many great coaches did their motivating on the practice field. Coaches such as Halas and Lombardi set up practices in such a way that they would create exceptionally competitive environments which motivated their players more than others. These coaches empowered their players through competitive drills, of which the winners would find themselves rewarded with more playing time. Bill Belichick has always given opportunities for undrafted, small-school college players to tryout on his team if he sees potential in them (McCaskey 380). It is actions such as this which foster an incredibly competitive and motivated attitude on the Patriots team, which has been the most dominant in the NFL over the last 15 years.

### **Role Models**

The difference in intensity of behaviors modeled by the head coach is often the difference between a good coach and a great coach. A coach who successfully acts as a role model is able to get his players to replicate desired behaviors, typically making the players easier to coach. According to Deluga (1992), leading by example is related

significantly to high LMX (Yukl, et al.). Head coaches can use their own behavior to not only dictate the ways in which their players act to an extent, but also to ease the burden of coaching, since their players will be “on the same page” as their coach. The behaviors which the best coaches have role modeled to their players with positive results are humility, confidence, work ethic and commitment, and integrity. Examples of each of these traits will be given in the following paragraphs to better explain why they create the best role models in the NFL from the coaching position. Through these traits, coaches have been able to improve their team’s successes as well as the character of their players. Examples of each of these traits will be explored through multiple cases of head coaches, who may or may not have displayed these traits, with mixed results of failure and success in their careers.

Confidence and humility don’t seem to work hand in hand in the NFL most of the time. Oftentimes, confidence is confused for arrogance or cockiness. The best players, such as Ray Lewis, and the best coaches, such as Bill Belichick, are able to remain supremely confident in their own abilities and the abilities of their teams while still maintaining a humble persona. One specific way that coaches can display this confidence and humility at the same time is in post-game press conferences. Win or lose, it is the coaches job as a humble and confident leader to give all credit for successes to his players, while also taking responsibility for any mistakes made throughout the game. Humility is something which the most successful head coaches in the NFL have all displayed during their careers. One way in which coaches display humility is through their willingness to change and accept their own tactical or schematic flaws instead of insisting that they are always correct. By having the ability to recognize weaknesses,

coaches can avoid unnecessary losses. Recognizing weaknesses and working to specifically improve in those weak areas causes teams to move forward. Though it would seem wise to maintain at least a humble façade, not all coaches do.

One example of a coach whose humility has allowed him to recognize weakness on his team, improve upon it, and come out successful, is Joe Gibbs. Gibbs knew that his team wasn't good enough to block a player like Lawrence Taylor, a legendary pass rusher. Because Gibbs had the humility to recognize this, he created multiple different offensive formations which would allow for his team to maintain an advantage on the field. Creating winged "H-back" sets, trips formations, and other variations of his offense allowed him to protect his quarterback and set him up for more success in the pocket, which ultimately helped the Redskins offense immensely. It is the head coach's responsibility to recognize strengths and weaknesses on his own team as well as on his opponents' teams. A coach who refuses to adjust for another team's strengths or his own team's weaknesses displays an arrogant mentality which can cause the team to suffer. Former New York Jets head coach Rex Ryan is an incredibly outspoken, overly-confident coach who made "annual guarantees about [the Jets] winning a title" (Brinson). Ryan (son of legendary coach Buddy Ryan), now head coach of the Buffalo Bills has given up on his guarantees of winning the Super Bowl. Ryan may have realized after years of failing to play in the Super Bowl that his post-game interview declarations of success were crossing the line between confident and obnoxious, and perhaps Ryan was putting too much pressure on his teams to perform at the level of Super Bowl champions.

Ryan's antics may also be hurting his team in ways he doesn't realize. His energetic, entertaining, overly-confident interviews with the media are a tactic he's been

using for years. Ryan said in September when he was asked about his upcoming game with the New England Patriots, "I expect to win. I don't care who we play...I don't care if I sound like whoever, I'm just being me" (Glauber). While it is not disputable that this is something Ryan should say to his players, it is debatable as to whether Ryan should be drawing so much attention to himself in regards to the media. Ryan very frequently draws an excess of attention from the media, distracting his players and possibly the organization he works for as a whole. On the other end of the spectrum is Bill Belichick, who very rarely answers any questions unless he believes it pertains to his team. Belichick has often refused to answer any personal questions about himself or his players if he believed it would distract from the Patriots ultimate goal of winning the next game on their schedule. Humility when addressing the media may be less exciting for viewers to watch and the media to report on, however it seems to work for coaches like Belichick who dislike distractions for their teams.

Other recent examples of humility, or lack thereof, in press conferences with the media show a great deal about the who the head coach really is. Arizona Cardinals head coach Bruce Arians showed in September in an interview after losing to the New England Patriots that he was completely willing to place the blame of the loss on his players. After the Sunday night loss, Arians told media that he was "angry, disappointed, embarrassed" by his team. Arians specifically called out rookie Robert Nkemdiche, saying that the young player's performance was "poor". These comments may have had a very negative effect on Nkemdiche. As a first-round draft pick this year for Arizona, they expected great defensive production from him. Since the week 1 loss to New England, and Bruce Arians blaming some of the loss directly on Nkemdiche, the rookie out of Ole Miss has

had 1 tackle in his other two active games. Blaming players for losses will lower the player's liking of the coach, as well as their trust in him, which will hurt LMX.

Tom Coughlin, the ex-head coach of the New York Giants, won 2 Super Bowls in his time with the team. In his final season with New York in 2015, his Giants lost a close game to the Dallas Cowboys in which Giants' quarterback Eli Manning admitted he made the final mistake of the game which gave the Cowboys a chance to win the game. Despite Manning taking the blame, Coughlin told the media that "there's nobody else to blame but me. I take full responsibility for it because the strategy was wrong at the end" (Rosenthal). It is not to suggest that if the coach is humble and takes responsibility for the failures of the team, then the team will win. The humility of the coach, especially in public, when addressing the media, creates better relationships between the players and the coach, who the players feel is more trustworthy and likeable because he didn't blame the players for the team's failures. This is also not to say that Tom Coughlin is the perfect example of humility, as he, among countless other NFL coaches, has stated his player's mistakes as the reason the team lost. No coach displays perfect humility all the time. However, the coaches who do it more will find themselves having better relationships with their players. Humility then increases LMX, but not necessarily success. There have been very successful head coaches who did not display a great amount of humility, yet their players still performed very well. Humility then, is important, but not required from head coaches who want successful teams.

The next trait, confidence, is fairly common for NFL coaches, as they have coached football for so long before they typically become a head coach that they are confident in their own abilities to coach well. The differentiating factor here is whether

they are confident through high stake situations, such as Super Bowls. Confidence in a Super Bowl, for example, can involve changing a game plan at halftime, and having the confidence that you coached your players well enough to execute. Some older coaches, such as Curly Lambeau who coached the Packers during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, gained confidence early on in their careers because they were excellent players, and because they were pioneers in the professional game, so there were no NFL coaches before them to have set expectations for players (McCaskey 79). Coach Paul Brown's confidence stems from his vast wealth of knowledge about the game. Brown never hesitated to teach his players not only how to do things, but also why. His ability to answer any question a player had with sound reason gave him the ultimate confidence as a coach translated to his players displaying confidence about what they were doing on the field (McCaskey 114). Cleveland Browns kicker Lou Groza described Brown as a coach who "set the stage for others to emulate him" (McCaskey 123). Bill Belichick is the current coach who comes to mind when thinking about supremely confident leaders in the NFL in the most important games. Bill Belichick's demeanor on the sideline does not change from week one to the Super Bowl. No matter the stress of the situation, Belichick remains largely the same person on the sideline, which is not always common.

Confidence, however, does not always need to be "real" for a coach to be successful. Bill Walsh led the 49ers to dominance in the 1980's, yet admitted that he was always doubting himself. Walsh studied the game of football as much as anyone, and though he very consistently exuded confidence, he was very shaken by the criticism of players and fans, always unsure if what he was doing would be the best thing for his team (McCaskey 281, 303). Even without this inner confidence that many other successful

coaches had, Walsh was able to win 3 Super Bowls with San Francisco in the 1980's, even when the team was in shambles just before Walsh took over in 1979 (McCaskey 277). Similarly to humility, confidence typically helps coaches succeed, although it is not necessary in order to gain great success.

Another trait which all coaches hope their players will have is strong levels of commitment and a great work ethic. Nothing says "I don't care about this team's success" to a player more than when a coach is lazy and uncommitted. There are no coaches at the NFL level who are lazy or uncommitted, however there are differing levels of commitment and work ethic that coaches can act upon. Because players in the NFL typically worked harder than everyone else in college football to make it to the league, there is an exceptionally high bar set for the expectations of work ethic. When a coach is working harder than his players, it gives those players no excuse not to work just as hard. Coach Paul Brown was the last person to leave the Cleveland Browns facilities during the season, and the first one to be there every morning. His players knew that he wanted to win and was willing to work hard for it. The first of Paul Brown's principles which he taught to his players was: "Players should expect to work hard every day regardless of weather conditions" (McCaskey 113). Even horrible weather would not keep Brown and his team from working extremely hard every day to improve. Brown set the precedent that his players made no excuses, in the same way which Brown himself made no excuses. His fourth principle is noted as "Sacrifices will make this team special". Brown valued hard work and sacrifice, and knew that if he displayed these characteristics, his players would follow. Similar to Brown is Belichick, who has programmed his players to sacrifice for the good of the team, trusting that the head coach knows what that is. In a



2016 interview, Julian Edelman, one of the Patriots leading receivers, told the media that he would 'carry water cups on the sideline with a smile on his face' if Belichick told him to do it (Dubin). Belichick's system has emphasized the value of commitment to the team's goals over one's own successes to the point where a star player is willing to sit out of a game for the good of the team.

The last, and possibly most important aspect of role model behavior for head coaches is their integrity. When coaches display a clear set of values which everyone around them can see, these values are oftentimes adopted by the players. The greatly successful coaches in this respect were the ones whose players could tell you what their coaches values were, because the coach displayed them so often and openly. The coach who will always stand a head above the rest in this category is Vince Lombardi. Lombardi taught "magis". This meant that each player would not simply be a good football player, but a great person (McCaskey 201). He displayed the ethics and values that define a great person- he was honest, fair, and compassionate. With such a strong focus for his players to be "great people", one might think that Lombardi neglected the football side of coaching. This could not be more wrong. Lombardi reminded his players often that "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." Yet even with winning set high as the ultimate goal, his players knew that if they ever cheated or played unfairly to win, he would be greatly disappointed with them. Lombardi wanted the desire to win more than anything to come to fruition in personal sacrifice and hard work, never in dishonestly or lack of morality (McCaskey 205). Lombardi consistently led by example, and was a role model that his players could always follow.

Not all coaches display such high role modeling behaviors. Some coaches have either displayed immoral behaviors or a simple lack of ethics, and still find ways to win. Bill Belichick's dynasty with the Patriots is one which has been surrounded by criticism because of several "scandals". First, in 2007 was "Spygate", in which the Patriots were caught filming their opponents signals for weeks, or even years, in order to use them to decode the other team's offensive and defensive play calling. This could have given Belichick enormous advantages over opposing teams, since he might be able to set his team up for success better knowing the opposing team's scheme before each play. In 2015 was "Deflategate", which was much less serious of an infraction, yet still serious enough to see Tom Brady suspended by the league for the first 4 games of the 2016 NFL season. Deflategate is the term the media and league has used to say that Tom Brady was having assistant coaches let air out of the footballs he would be using before games so that he would have a better grip on the ball (Van Natta Jr. and Wickersham). In both cases, it is considered that Belichick is the reason his players and assistants have felt they are able to bend, and even break, the rules in order to gain a competitive advantage. This example shows that not all successful coaches have been entirely ethical role models for their players to replicate during their careers.

In each of the four cases of role model behavior, the traits are not uniform. Many successful coaches have gotten by without one or even two of the four traits, though it is very difficult to find a great head coach completely lacking of all four traits. It may be that rather than these coaches forcing themselves to display behaviors with which others have found success, the great coaches magnify the traits with which they are already most

comfortable. Chuck Noll had great successes with the Pittsburgh Steelers. When asked about his persona, he said:

“I’ve never been a good copy at any stage in my life. It’s just not my nature. I’ve always avoided publicity. I’ve never strived for it because I don’t think it’s important...every person is unique. I’ve never patterned myself after anybody. You have to be what you are. That’s what I am.”

Noll describes the success of his personality within coaching as simply being the best person and coach he could be, while always focusing on what he found important. Many great coaches have always found success following this same logic as Noll (McCaskey 270). Whether these coaches’ relationships with their players were more distant like Paul Brown, or close like Vince Lombardi, the best coaches have always been able to leverage their relationships with their players to get the very best effort and execution out of them. The success they found was never without great effort and ability to make their players work hard. These two attributes stand out as key differentiating factors without which coaches would not be very successful in the NFL. As a coach, knowing their own personal strengths within interpersonal relationships is a key aspect to successfully leveraging the relationships they have with their players. Ultimately, coaches need to create high quality relationships with their players, because without the support of the players, the coach cannot control the game and direct his team to a successful outcome.

### **The Differentiating Tactical Dimensions of Their Coaching Methods**

Head coaches in the NFL have always had a great number of responsibilities, however some things have changed since the first professional football season in 1921. In the early years, professional football was much less popular than college football. In fact, professional football may not have survived without its early pioneers, many of whom were players and head coaches. In an interview with ESPN's Greg Garber, Mike Ditka, former Hall of Fame Chicago Bears tight end and coach said, "There were a lot of lean years." Ditka credits the survival of football to men such as Tim Mara, Art Rooney, and legendary head coach George Halas, who were all pioneers for the game. In order to understand the role of the head coach in professional football over the past 95 years, you must understand from what the game has evolved.

Professional football originally began as a collection of company football teams (such as the Staley Starch Company and Quincy Railroad Company) that wished to compete in an organized league (McCaskey 5). Everyone involved in the risky investment of professional football was doing everything possible to remain legitimate. One of the ways in which teams organized themselves to save money was by hiring a head coach that would also play on the team. Coaches like George Halas, Guy Chamberlin, Curly Lambeau, and even Tom Landry later in the 1950's acted as both players and coaches on their team (Wikipedia, *Player-coach*). Once the NFL gained more popularity and began to generate more revenue, it made more sense for teams to hire an older head coach with more experience and knowledge than continuing to hire coaches who were expected to maintain their own physical conditioning and skill, while also preparing their team for each season and game. As football has grown, the competition

and complexity of the game has also increased, and in today's league it would be considered all but impossible for an NFL player to also be the head coach of his team.

Coaches early on were responsible for organizing a team, scheduling practices and games, managing (generally) the entire franchise, and doing all they could to keep their team from failing and disappearing from professional football entirely. Coaches today are still responsible for organizing their team and running practices, however there is a laundry list of responsibilities which are expected from them now. For example, coaches today must come up with the overall scheme for their team, managing their assistant coaches to make sure their offensive, defensive and special teams are all functioning exactly the way they want. On top of being the final word on the team's strategy, the coach is responsible for the decision making, such as which quarterback to play or whether to go for it on 4<sup>th</sup> and goal or to attempt a field goal. Coaches also must break down film on their own team, constantly fixing errors, and break down film on opponents, generating a game plan every week in order to set their players up for success on the field. On top of all of this, the head coach is expected to be the leader of the team who sets an example for what he expects of his players. One aspect that coaches today don't have to worry about because of the owners and general managers of teams now is the survival of the franchise. Many of the original professional football coaches were a player, coach, and the general manager or owner of their franchise. The passing of time has relieved coaches of that duty, and for the most part, a head coach will not make or break an NFL franchise team.

Nearly all professional football coaches do have a lot in common, and what separates the good coaches from the great coaches is oftentimes in the details. As it is

with their personal characteristics and the ways in which they treat their players, the great coaches are not doing something differently, they are doing the same thing to a higher degree of intensity or with more care. Some of the simpler differences can be found in the way a head coach drives their team to work hard in practice. Some coaches push their men, and some coaches, such as Vince Lombardi, drive their men to complete exhaustion in order to get every single ounce of effort from each player on the team. When describing the training for the Green Bay Packers, McCaskey says,

“Over the course of training camp, Lombardi will beat down his players. He will constantly challenge their endurance. He will drill them a thousand times on every play, instruct them on every move they must make. And just when his players are ready to explode, he will praise them and acknowledge their achievements.” (199)

Many times it was simply the degree of intensity to which a coach drove their team in practice which made them successful. There are other aspects to the strategic and tactical dimensions of coaching which separate the good coaches from the truly great ones. One of those coaching tactics comes before the season even begins typically, in the NFL Draft and free agency. Though others are involved in the process of which players are signed onto the team, the head coach typically is the most influential person in this regard. When signing or releasing players, the head coach must know what is best for the team, even when others disagree.

### **Signing and Trading Players**

One aspect of being a head coach involves attaining the best players to play for your team, and getting rid of players who will hurt the team. This is done in collaboration

with the general manager and owners of the team, however the head coach is heavily involved for several reasons. The best coaches know exactly what type of player they want or need. The key to signing and releasing players is the ability to just talent, character, and work ethic, all while keeping in mind the type of player which you, as a coach, want playing for you. There are several ways to go about this. Some coaches simply draft or sign players out of free agency simply because they are the best players available, and the coach is confident that they can work with them. Other coaches pick players who fit their system well. Whatever the coach's strategy for selecting players and signing them, one key to success is that the great coaches know what it is which they seek. Each technique for selecting players has its benefits when used by a coach who knows the direction his program is going. For example, signing a star player might be a great way to excite fans and increase publicity for the team. If that star player does not fit into the system which your team works, they could cause more harm than good. Below are examples of the techniques used by some of the best coaches the NFL has ever seen, and the reasons behind their strategies.

During the early era of football through the 1940's, coaches such as George Halas, Guy Chamberlin and Curly Lambeau were greatly limited in this area. With the ultimate goal of those first three decades of football being to simply popularize the sport at the professional level (until then, football was only widely accepted at the collegiate level), these early coaches simply did everything they could to get great college players to sign on to their teams (McCaskey 5-6, 60-61, 83-86). This early on in professional football, no one was entirely sure that the NFL would be such a success, and finding a "real" job other than football was a much more dependable living. Because of this, the availability

of players during this time was so much more limited, and teams without an incredibly influential coach were defined solely by the players who signed with them that season.

There are several excellent examples of coaches who had an eye for great talent, and selected those players regardless of other factors. Paul Brown (Cleveland Browns head coach from 1946 to 1962) wanted intelligent, fast, hard-working players who would be entirely devoted to their team (McCaskey 123). Brown would sign the best players with those qualities with the confidence that he could coach them to be great players. If those players refused to cooperate or did not display the characteristics Brown desired, they would be cut from the team. For example, if a player showed the lack of effort Brown desired in practice, that player would be let go. Players under Brown knew that excellence was demanded on that team (McCaskey 123-124). Brown selected players such as Otto Graham, an incredibly talented quarterback around whom Brown would work tirelessly to use Graham's skill fully and surround his quarterback with great players that accented his style (McCaskey 139). Brown also selected legendary running back Jim Brown in the 1956 draft with the confidence that he could maximize the talent of this young man by surrounding him with an offensive scheme that would be favorable to his running style (McCaskey 140). Another example of a player drafted by Brown in 1956 but less well known is quarterback Milt Plum, who was nowhere near as talented as Brown's previous quarterback, Otto Graham. However, under Brown, Plum was able to achieve a quarterback rating (QBR) of 90.3. Plum was deficient in many areas, yet Brown changed his offensive scheme in order to get the very best out of Plum. It is easier to see just how beneficial Coach Brown's adjustments were for Plum when his QBR



under Brown of 90.3 is compared to his QBR in Detroit later in his career of 53.15 (McCaskey 144-145).

Another example of a coach who maximized the talent of the players whom he drafted was Joe Gibbs (head coach of the Washington Redskins from 1981 to 1993). Gibbs was incredibly practical, and made the most of what he had. For example, when hired in Washington, Gibbs was left with fullback John Riggins, for whom Gibbs adjusted his offense. Running backs typically take on pass blocking roles whenever the ball is not run, but because Riggins was a poor blocker, Gibbs added a tight end to his protection and let Riggins avoid his weakness in blocking (McCaskey 343). Gibbs found himself with many heavily built, “bruiser” type running backs in Washington. Because of this, he gave extra attention to his offensive line to ensure that those running backs, such as Clinton Portis and George Rogers, would be successful in a running style with which they were comfortable. Gibbs perfected the counter trey, a running play which best utilized the type of players he repeatedly found himself with as the Redskins head coach (McCaskey 318-319). By highly talented players, Gibbs found success because he knew that he would be able to build plays (such as the counter trey) around those talented players.

Don Shula, the winningest coach in NFL history, was a coach who wanted every star player he could acquire. Shula was correct in assuming that he could take a talented group and lead them aptly to successful seasons. In his 33 seasons, Shula notched 328 wins, and went to the Super Bowl on 6 occasions with 6 different quarterbacks: Johnny Unitas, Earl Morrell, Bob Griese, David Woodley, Don Strock, and Dan Marino (Montecruz). Bill Belichick (the current New

England Patriots head coach), widely considered the great NFL coach of his generation, has also taken a team to 6 Super Bowls. All of which have come with Tom Brady as quarterback. This is not to take away from the dynasty which Belichick has created, but rather to show just how incredible it is for Don Shula to manage 6 Super Bowl trips with different quarterbacks. Instead of being system-oriented like Belichick, Shula was player-oriented, and he found immense success in that (Montecruz). Shula could take any player with immense amounts of talent and create plays for him that would result in success. Johnny Unitas, Bob Griese and Dan Marino were all phenomenal players on their own, but they were lucky to have played for Shula, who strategized to emphasize each one of their strengths.

As is seen with Belichick, another coaching method of attaining players is to find players who will fit the system that head coach has put in place. Bill Belichick has created a system in New England which emphasizes a scheme in which any good player can be inserted for another, and the team will be able to find success. Belichick's "just do your job" motto provides all players the opportunity to find success on his team so long as they are able to give everything they have to the higher goal of "team first" (McCaskey 350). The advantage within a system like Belichick's is that it fosters intense competition, and finds itself less affected by injuries than other systems that rely on superstar players to create the team's success. The competition is driven by regular reminders that anyone on his team can earn a starting job if they work hard enough and prove that they can get the job done in games. Men who have been overlooked or

undervalued find great success in the hard work and dedication that Belichick wants to see on his team.

Similar to Belichick, legendary coach Vince Lombardi (Green Bay Packers coach from 1959 to 1968) found great success in drafting players that would fit a system. The system for Lombardi however was more focused on the person, and less on a football scheme. Though Lombardi's players could run the power sweep to perfection, it was not his plays for which he is remembered so fondly. Lombardi had an intense focus on improvement of oneself as not just a football player, but in all aspects of life. Stemming from his Jesuit (Catholic) upbringing, he stressed to his players that they needed to not only be great at blocking and tackling, but to be great people as well (McCaskey 205, 233). Lombardi selected players that he believed would do everything they could to reach their greatest potential as a football player and as a person.

Like both Lombardi and Belichick, San Francisco 49ers head coach Bill Walsh found great success in the 1980's using his own system for which he selected players. Originally Walsh created his system on offense, known as the West Coast Offense, in order to make up for the lack of arm strength his quarterbacks had in his time as an assistant coach in Cincinnati (McCaskey 282). However, once established, Walsh would begin to draft very talented players that would fit his style of play perfectly. Walsh often traded away multiple draft picks in order to obtain the exact one or two players he really wanted. This served him very well during his time in San Francisco, and Walsh never failed to make the most of the talent which he selected (McCaskey 283-284). Examples

of players who Walsh made sure to obtain were Fred Dean, Jerry Rice, Joe Montana, Ronnie Lott, and Steve Young to name a few who stand out (McCaskey 286).

Chuck Noll is an excellent example of a coach who drafted players around whom he believed he could build a dynasty. As said by Paul Zimmerman, Noll had a vision of “beef on [his] line and speed and smarts behind it” (McCaskey 247). Noll had a perfect vision of what he wanted his team to be, and he selected and drafted and traded for the exact players that could make his vision a reality. “Mean” Joe Green, L.C. Greenwood, Ernie Holmes, and Dwight White made up the original defensive line that was described as the “Steel Curtain” (McCaskey 247). Noll drafted players like Mel Blount, Lynn Swann, John Stallworth and Terry Bradshaw who would all live up to the expectation of playing the way Noll wanted (McCaskey 243-246). Noll’s approach to selecting players (choosing the best player that fits into the vision of a franchise) is commonly used by teams hoping to achieve long term success. This strategy worked most likely because Noll had an extremely keen eye for talent, and partially due to luck that many of the players Noll drafted were healthy throughout much of their careers. From the very start of the NFL until today, a huge differentiator between good coaches and great coaches is that the great coaches always managed to sign the players they needed in order for their team to win games.

A very recent example of the way in which coaches obtain or let go of players was seen in NFL week 8 when Patriots head coach Bill Belichick traded linebacker Jamie Collins to the Cleveland Browns. Collins was an All-Pro Second team player in 2015, yet Belichick did not see the need to keep him. For most coaches in the NFL, cutting someone who is arguably the best athlete on the defensive side of the ball seems

ridiculous, especially when your team has a 7-1 record and are the Super Bowl favorites. However, Belichick does not believe that individual talent is more important the team, and though most coaches will say this, Belichick put this on display with this trade. When asked about the trade, Belichick simply said that he made the decision in the best interest of the team (Brinson). Collins' actions on the field and with the team were viewed by many as "freelancing", which is the exact opposite of Belichick's calculated, "do your job" style of football. About the trade, Cleveland head coach Hue Jackson said, "'He can freelance for me then (*laughter*). The way he freelances is OK with me. What happened there is not what is important for us here. We see a player that is very talented and has a tremendous skill set that fits in with what we do so he is a Cleveland Brown now.'" Bill Belichick has won 4 Super Bowls in the last 15 seasons, and is undeniably the most successful coach of the last 20 years. Hue Jackson has been a head coach for 2 seasons in the NFL. In 2011, Jackson led the Oakland Raiders to a 7-4 start, only to end the season disappointingly at 8-8. This 2016 season is his 2<sup>nd</sup> as a head coach, and he has led the Cleveland Browns to a deplorable record of 0-8. It speaks volumes of the impact a great head coach can make in the success of a franchise through player signings or trades, and shows very clearly why some teams are repeatedly successful (Patriots) and others (like the Browns) are not. Great coaches differentiate themselves from the rest by knowing what is best for their team, and not compromising that for what is best for a single player. Cleveland Browns coach Jackson may be simply looking to jumpstart his 0-8 team with a great defensive athlete, however a player that is not truly best for the team will not be able to lead that franchise to long-term success.

It is important to note here that, although some coaches, like Bill Belichick have full control of all football operations within their organizations, many do not. Within some organizations the General Manager, Head of Football Operations, or even the owner himself can be in charge of roster moves, amongst other things. The coaches discussed were those who had or do have control of their rosters and are able to make decisions relatively freely, without input from the team owner, or someone else in the front office of the organization. The way head coaches deal with the front office will be discussed later within this chapter.

### **Team Management, Preparation, Assessment and Strategy**

Aside from moving players onto or off their roster, head coaches have many other responsibilities involving the management of their team. In order to take care of responsibilities such as studying opponents, game preparation, teaching plays and scheme to their players and maximizing every ounce of talent from those players, head coaches must surround themselves with the best assistant coaches possible. It makes sense that the most successful teams are the ones which not only have a great head coach, but great assistant coaches as well. Oftentimes however, head coaches in the NFL are not entirely comfortable “handing over the reins” to an assistant coach who may act as a coordinator of an aspect of the game. With the right people in place around the head coach, he can focus on these greatly important details on his team. Assistant coaches are also critical in relaying points of emphasis to the players from the head coach. For example, after games, the coaching staff will meet to discuss their own coaching performance as well as their players’ performance. In a meeting like this, the head coach will typically tell the position

coach who works with the wide receivers that they did a great job on pass plays, but were not blocking well enough. It's then the wide receivers' coach's job to make sure that the players in his group practice blocking in practice and improve in time for the next game. Because the head coach has so much to get done in preparation for the coming weeks, he must trust his assistant coaches enough to let them take care of the problems within their own groups. Once assistant coaches are given that responsibility and have proven that they can accomplish the head coach's goal for their groups, the head coach can move on to other important aspects of coaching and team management.

One skill head coaches need is the ability to study their opponents in order to come up with the best game plan. In the early days of football this would involve going to other teams' games to watch them play and writing down what was seen as strengths and weaknesses. One coach revolutionized scouting of other teams though through his execution of intense study. Paul Brown of the Cleveland Browns was known as the Professor, demanding that his players not only know their playbooks well, but that they know why they were doing exactly what they were doing on every play (McCaskey 113-114). Brown stressed detail with his players, and because of this his teams were incredibly well executing teams, from the 1940's through the 1970's (McCaskey 128-152). Paul Brown was one of the first coaches to grade his players on their performance in practice and games by watching film and detailing what his players needed to do better on every snap of the ball (McCaskey 155). A technique such as grading film and giving players frequent feedback is just one example of how Brown revolutionized preparation, coaching and player development. Though film is commonplace today even in the lowest levels of football, it is still vital to the success of teams. Every team in the NFL watches

film of their practices and games so that coaches can go back to specific mistakes made, show on the film exactly why the action the player made was wrong, and show them on film exactly what they should have been doing. Film eliminates any questions about where physical mistakes were made on the field. The coaches can simply turn on a computer and watch every play frame by frame. Mental mistakes are not as easy to spot however. A player might make an incredibly impressive physical play, but may have made a mental mistake which will cost them in the future. Coaches must also fix these mental mistakes, just as Paul Brown began doing many years ago. Brown would test his players on their playbooks to ensure that they knew their assignments perfectly. Belichick has taken this even further, questioning his players regularly on what the opponent is likely to do in certain situations. By constantly testing their players mental focus and effort, coaches like Belichick and Brown could make sure that their coaching was being absorbed.

In order to fully maximize the potential of each player, Brown would give players individual personality and intelligence tests so that he could develop more personal training methods for each of his players with the overall goal of getting every ounce of talent out of them that he could (McCaskey 155). Brown's old-school approach to teaching discipline and dedication to his players first is one that some coaches have doubted can be successful, however the only dominantly successful coach of the last 20 years, Bill Belichick, seems to be following Brown's example very closely. Because of the discipline and hard study these coaches demand from their teams, coaches like Brown and Belichick, along with other highly successful coaches, have been able to execute highly complex schemes to a pronounced level of implementation. It is this high



functioning execution of complex schemes that oftentimes gives these teams great advantages over their opponents. For example, the Cleveland Browns ran the T Formation with such attention to detail and desire for perfection that it was run successfully more than teams who had used the T Formation for 25 years previously (McCaskey 114). In his 17 seasons as the Browns head coach, Paul Brown only had one losing season (McCaskey 152).

Another great example of development of their players is the Pittsburgh Steelers coach between 1969 and 1991, Chuck Noll. Noll won 4 Super Bowls in 6 years while coaching the Steelers. The dominance of the Steelers in the 1970's is comparable to that of the Packers under Lombardi in the 1960's and the 49ers under Walsh in the 1980's. These are teams who played with the expectation of winning. Chuck Noll was very special for several reasons though, one being the way he developed his players. Many of the players whom Noll drafted were not very liked by Steelers fans initially (Joe Greene), and some did not perform very well at the onset of their NFL careers (Terry Bradshaw). Noll had the patience and confidence in himself that he could turn the group of men whom he drafted into some of the best players of their generation (McCaskey 269-270). Noll was a skilled enough coach to teach his players great technique, smart enough to know that they needed to be weightlifting to get stronger, and football savvy enough to make sure that he put his players in the best position to be successful. Bradshaw, for example, began his career with 6 touchdowns and 24 interceptions, yet Noll believed in him, was tough on him, and coached him to become a Hall of Fame quarterback by the time he retired ("Pro Football Reference").

Aside from all this comes the intense preparation to which a majority of the great coaches in NFL history subjected themselves and their players. Obviously Paul Brown comes to mind a greatly disciplined and detail-oriented coach, however Bill Walsh is the coach who took Brown's preparation to the next level. Brown had prepared for games more than any previous coach, and had the mental capacity to know which plays to call in which situations (McCaskey 114). Walsh coached under Brown for 7 years, and learned a great amount about organization and planning. When Walsh became the head coach of the San Francisco 49ers in 1979, he brought with him the organizational techniques he learned from Brown, and took offensive game planning to the next level. Walsh is largely credited with the creation of what is called the "First 15" script (Farmer). Before each game Walsh would script the first 15 plays he wanted to run against the opposing team to see what was working, what was not, and how the defense reacted to these 15 different plays. This preparation practice is used by a great number of coaches throughout the country today. Walsh paved the way for the modern day play script. In the NFL today it is nearly impossible to watch a head coach and catch them without a thin stack of laminated pages in their hands. Walsh's preparation for games proved successful in the 1980's, and since many teams have copied his practice of scripting every play that the coach might want to call in every situation. For example, the coach will have the category "3<sup>rd</sup> down and long", and underneath that he will have a list of plays which he believes his team can execute in order to gain the yards needed for a 1<sup>st</sup> down. Coaches who are as prepared as Bill Walsh was give themselves an edge because they are able to have a clearer head during the game. They give themselves the ability to do a majority of the critical thinking required before the game even begins, while they are not so stressed by the situation of

the game itself. By properly managing the many aspects of their team and the game, head coaches are typically more successful than those coaches who are not skilled in preparation and organization.

### **Game Tactics**

The knowledge, flexibility, intelligence and creativity of the great coaches is what gave them the competitive edge against other coaches in the NFL when it came to their coaching tactics within games. In the early years of professional football, most coaches were active players on their own teams. During this time, coaches like Halas and Chamberlin led their teams well, in practice and in games, but essentially all of the play calling was left up to the quarterback on offense. These player coaches grew older and retired as players, but continued their careers as coaches and owners (McCaskey). As their role shrank to being simply a coach, they were able to focus more on the details of the game and on managing the tactical play calling during the game, with the advantage of being able to watch the game develop from the sideline. Even then however, the quarterbacks were still calling most of the offensive plays from on the field.

Coach Paul Brown revolutionized play calling in the 1950's and 1960's using "messenger guards" to call his plays on offense. Because Brown had designed the offense and knew it better than anyone else, he felt that it was only right that he be the one calling the plays in the ways which he saw fit. In order to relay his plays onto the field, one of his offensive guards would come to him at the end of each play to get the call from coach, and run back onto the field to tell his teammates (McCaskey 123-127). In today's NFL, the head coach or offensive coordinator relays the play call to the quarterback on almost

every play, and they have coached the players on the field to know when an adjustment is needed in the play based on what the defense is doing before the snap of the ball. The best head coaches have orchestrated their teams in such a way that no matter the situation, their offense should be able to adjust based on something the team has practiced in order to beat a certain defensive look. This all stems from Paul Brown's desire to lead his team the way he thought would bring them the most success. This kind of innovation finds its way into many NFL teams, however few changes have been as impactful as Brown's.

Two examples of coaches who have innovated on the football field can be seen in Bill Walsh and Buddy Ryan. Walsh, the 49ers coach in the 1980s completely revolutionized offensive scheme in all of football when he developed the West Coast Offense as an assistant in Cincinnati under head coach Paul Brown (McCaskey 282). By the time Walsh was the head coach of the 49ers some years later, he had perfected this new style of offense which led his team to great success. As an assistant coach for the Bengals, Walsh needed to come up with an offensive scheme that most benefitted his weak armed but accurate quarterback, Virgil Carter. Up until this time (1968), almost every offense ran the ball in order to gain consistent short yardage, and threw the ball deep down the field as a riskier play in order to gain more yard. In this style of offense, the run game sets up the pass game. This means that by running the ball a significant amount, the defense would focus more on the backfield, and lose sight of wide receivers slipping past them for deep passes. Because Carter did not have the arm to complete long passes, Walsh changed the offense entirely so that the passing game set up the running game. By design, the Bengals offense would complete a great number of short passes,

spreading the defense out into coverage, and then they would run the ball with much greater ease and success (Theismann).

On the defensive side of the ball, until Buddy Ryan, most teams used some version of a 4-3 or a 3-4 defense (meaning 3 defensive linemen, 4 linebackers), with some form of man-on-man or zone coverage behind those 7 front players. When Buddy Ryan was defensive coordinator for the Chicago Bears he developed the “46 defense” (named after #46, Bears safety Doug Plank), which would change the way defenses are planned and developed (Layden). The 46 defense stemmed from the 4-3 defense, but was an entirely new strategy. It may seem simple, but by moving Plank to the outside linebacker position with the ability to play both in shorter pass coverage and in the run game, offensive coordinators and head coaches in the NFL had no idea how to beat this new defense. The 46 defense’s weakness would eventually be exploited by quarterbacks and receivers who took advantage of frequent one-on-one coverage outside. Even with its weaknesses, the 46 remains to be one of the most successful defensive schemes when used correctly, and has influenced defensive coordinators and head coaches for many years. Buddy Ryan however, unlike Bill Walsh, was unable to find any great success as a head coach, finishing with a head coaching record of 55-55-1 (Layden). This exemplifies how innovation and ability to create amazing scheme and tactics can be very influential and change all of the NFL, however it will not automatically bring success. There are an infinite number of reasons as to why Buddy Ryan was unable to find success as a head coach, however one of them may be that he was unable to surround himself with the assistant coaches he needed in order to succeed. The role of assistant coaches and their relationships to the head coaches can have both great positive and negative impact on the

results of games, as will be seen in the following section regarding the head coach's role managing the people who surround him.

### **Management of Assistant Coaches and the Front Office**

Buddy Ryan was a mastermind on defense, however throughout his career often expressed his disapproval of what the offense was doing. When coaching the defense of the Houston Oilers, Ryan was seen punching offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride and yelling at him in criticism of his offensive scheme which Ryan believed was not holding onto the ball long enough, thus hurting Ryan's defense (Layden). Ryan's temperament may not have been right for that of a head coach, despite many of his players recalling that they had very close, meaningful relationships with him (Layden). Coaches like Bill Walsh have been able to coordinate one side of the ball successfully while still managing the team as a whole successfully. Coaches like Buddy Ryan may have been better off if they remained in the roll of coordinator rather than head coach. Many head coaches since Ryan have found success as a team using his 46 defense while Ryan was only able to find success at the defensive coordinator position.

As is seen in the case of Buddy Ryan, if a head coach does not surround himself with the right people, it can be difficult for them to find success for their team, regardless of how talented they are at coaching. Within the NFL, the number of assistant coaches has grown significantly since the 1920's to the point where each NFL team has at least 15 assistant coaches, not including strength and speed coaches. Coaches need to have the good judgement, intelligence, and confidence to hire the coaches that their team needs in order to be successful. Coaching staffs spend as much time together as the players do at

times, and they need to get along and work well as a unit in order to maximize their abilities as coaches. For example, the Houston Oilers coach Jack Pardee hired two coordinators who loathed each other. Buddy Ryan (defensive coordinator) and Kevin Gilbride are the perfect example of incredible football coaches who did not work well together. The Oilers, under leadership of Pardee as head coach, made it to the division playoffs that year, only to lose to the Chiefs. The Oilers went to the playoffs in 7 consecutive years, and yet were unable to make the championship game a single time (Smith). This might suggest that the coaching was there to create these incredibly talented teams, however leadership from the head coach may have been lacking, keeping the Oilers from making the push to make the Super Bowl during this stretch.

Bill Walsh is an excellent example of a coach who had full control over his team, yet had the ability to hire assistant coaches who would help him run the team as he saw best, and was confident in the abilities of these assistants. Walsh's 49ers were a rarely paralleled dynasty. In the 1980's, Walsh's team won 3 Super Bowls in his 10 seasons as head coach (McCaskey 304-305). What's even more remarkable is that when Walsh retired in 1989, the 49ers, made up of almost entirely the same group of players and coaches, won their 4<sup>th</sup> Super Bowl in 10 years. Walsh hired the coaches that led that team to another Super Bowl win, and by 1993, 5 of those assistant coaches would become head coaches of their own NFL teams (*Coaching Tree*). It is easy to see how the hiring of the correct assistants can make or break an NFL head coach's successes, as it may have with both Jack Pardee's "choking" Oilers or Bill Walsh's championship 49ers.

The other main entity which the head coach must deal with is the front office, or management of the team as an organization. Each NFL team has an owner or owners,

who are essentially in control of the entire team because they control the money involved. For example, owner of the New England Patriots Robert Kraft hired Bill Belichick as head coach of the team in 2000, and immediately gave Belichick full control of all football decisions (Graham). With Kraft's support, Belichick has been able to prove that he is one of the best NFL coaches in the history of professional football. On the other side of the spectrum was Al Davis, the former owner of the Oakland Raiders. Davis never gave full control of the franchise to a coach as Kraft is still doing with Belichick, and it has showed. The Oakland Raiders have shuffled through multiple head coaches over the past 15 years very rapidly, and Davis never provided the environment needed for a coach to succeed in the "Black Hole".

It is easy to see just how different a head coaches career in a city can go depending on the management style of the owner. When Chuck Noll was hired in Pittsburg, legendary Steelers owner Art Rooney sat down to meet with Noll. Noll told Rooney that is he was going to run his football team, he needed to be given full control of everything, from the drafting of players to the weight training they would be required to do (McCaskey 242). Because Noll got along so well with the management and the Rooney's were a smart football family that knew Noll was the right man for the job, the Steelers experience successes in the 1970's that were similar to those of Lombardi in the 1950's and Walsh in the 1980's. Oftentimes head coaches in the NFL who are masterminds of the game are unable to achieve great successes because of the people around them. When accounting for those personnel difficulties, it is the coaches who know how to build, manage, and coach their teams best with the greatest advantage.



### **The Differentiating Factors between Bill Belichick and Other NFL Coaches**

#### **Today**

The most successful coaches throughout NFL history have all had similarities to one another. They have all had a great understanding of the game, paired with the ability to transfer the necessary knowledge of their scheme and plays to their players effectively. All of these successful coaches have been incredibly hard working. However, many brutally unsuccessful coaches have also had great “football minds” and worked just as hard as the rest. Because every coach is different, it is impossible to say in each case why one coach was successful when others were not. Brad Adler argues that the one mutual characteristic which all great coaches have in common is that, when leading their players, these coaches “have to do it their own way” (2). Luckily, one of the most successful all-time coaches who does things “his own way” is currently coaching in the NFL, which allows for more in depth analysis of why he has been so successful, and also allows for comparisons with other current and past coaches. The 64 year-old New England head coach Bill Belichick currently holds a win-loss record of 194-71 with the Patriots. Though he was much less successful during his first stint as head coach of the Cleveland Browns for 5 years during the early 1990’s, Belichick is easily the most successful coach since Tom Landry and Chuck Noll retired around 1990 (“Pro Football Reference”). In Belichick’s 22 years of coaching, he has become the 4<sup>th</sup> for most wins by a head coach in NFL history, only behind Don Shula, George Halas and Tom Landry. Belichick’s playoff record of 23-10 is unmatched by any coach in NFL history, with the closest active coach to Belichick being Andy Reid with an 11-11 playoff record. Belichick has won the Super Bowl 4 times now with the Patriots (2001, 2003, 2004, 2014), placing him in the

company of Chuck Noll as the only two coaches to ever win 4 Super Bowls (“Pro Football Reference”). Some would argue that Bill Belichick is already the greatest NFL coach of all time. Regardless of whether that statement is accurate or not, Belichick’s success is not without cause.

In 2003, Brad Adler published his book, *Coaching Matters: Leaderships and Tactics of the NFL’s Ten Greatest Coaches*. Bill Belichick, only 3 years into his coaching tenure with the New England Patriots, is not on Adler’s list of these 10 greatest coaches. Despite this, Belichick fits Adler’s mold of what makes a great coach, and he displays the 3 characteristics which Adler recognizes in every great coach. “First, that the head coach is the most consequential member of a football organization. Second...that great coaches will ultimately win regardless of the talent or conditions that surround them. Third, that the manner in which a head coach communicates his concepts and utilizes his systems and techniques are just as important, if not more, than the quality of the strategies and procedures themselves” (2). A quote from O.A. Phillips, head coach of the Houston Oilers in the 1970’s said of head coach Don Shula, “He can take ‘hisins” and beat ‘yourins’, or he can take ‘yourins’ and beat ‘hisins”” (Adler). This quote tells us that some coaches are truly great enough to win, no matter the circumstances. It is under the assumption that Belichick is now within the realm of these great coaches that we are able to assess him and his career to gain the knowledge of what makes an NFL coach successful in the modern era of football.

Over the course of the NFL’s history, only 10 coaches have won 3 or more championships (*see appendix*). These coaches are responsible for 41 of the 95 NFL Championship Games ever played. When excluding coach Belichick, the most recently

active coach of one of the other 9 coaches was 1991, when Joe Gibbs was head coach of the Washington Redskins. Chuck Noll is the only coach who has won as many Super Bowls (4) as Belichick has. Noll's final Super Bowl victory came in 1979. This means that over the 36-year period spanning from 1980 until the present, there has not been a more successful coach, in terms of winning, as Bill Belichick. The first two chapters of this thesis have studied why head coaches have been successful based on personal and tactical dimensions. This final chapter looks to analyze Bill Belichick specifically in order to understand what makes today's greatest NFL coach so successful. Because the game of football is constantly changing due to rule modifications, new strategies, increasing size of the league and many other reasons, Belichick is the most relevant case study for what differentiates a great NFL coach from the rest.

There are several main factors which seem to be driving forces for Belichick's success in today's NFL. First, Belichick's attitude and personality allow him to control what happens in New England better than anyone else in the country can with their own respective teams. Second, Belichick has created a nearly bulletproof system within his team which relies only on the proper character, attitude and work ethic of his players. In comparison, a majority of NFL teams today would fall apart if their star players were unable to play. Belichick has mastered a system in which star players can thrive, but are not critical to the success of the program, should they become unable to play. Third, Belichick knows how to communicate his philosophy, system, schemes and techniques to his players in a way which they are able to understand it and execute. He also never allows players to get by with "maybe knowing or not knowing" exactly what they were taught (Fleming). On Belichick's team, buying in and putting the team first is just as

important as all the talent in the world. Last, Belichick, like so many other great coaches before him, has created a relationship with his quarterback that fosters collaboration and brings out the best in each of them. Before delving into examples of each of these factors, we must first talk about Belichick's history in order to fully recognize the reasons why Belichick is as successful as he has been and continues to be.

Bill Belichick has been head coach of the Patriots since 2000, when he led the team to a disappointing first season, finishing with a 5-11 record. Since then Belichick has had 15 winning seasons in a row. This kind of consistent winning is hard to find in the NFL, which is intentionally designed through the NFL Draft, salary caps, free agency, and other policies to help losing teams get better each year (McCaskey 43). Despite the design of the league fostering competition from all 32 teams, Belichick keeps winning. Belichick's recipe for success has been developed over many years. Belichick's father Steve raised Belichick on football, instilling in him the values of hard work and sacrifice. Steve Belichick wrote *Football Scouting Methods*, which many coaches used for years when seeking football talent. Belichick's mother was a teacher (McCaskey 351-352). The influence of his parents led him to a lifetime of coaching football. Though it may seem inconsequential, the knowledge and teaching skills Belichick learned growing up may have been the cornerstone upon which Belichick has built his knowledge and understanding of being a head coach in the NFL. Coaching legend Vince Lombardi said of coaching, "They call it coaching, but it is teaching" (McCaskey 199). When it's broken down, coaching is impossible to do if you are unable to teach. Someone may come up with the best defensive scheme in the world, but if that person is unable to teach his scheme to players and other coaches, he will never be a good coach. Belichick's father

provided experiences to him which helped him build a store of football knowledge. His mother provided him the opportunity of watching someone teach young people. The skills Belichick learned watching his mother teach would provide him with tools to teach even his most complex tactics and schemes to players when other coaches failed.

Belichick spent 20 years in the NFL as an assistant coach or coordinator before became the head coach of the Patriots in 2000 (“Pro Football Reference”). He also had 5 years of head coaching experience for the Cleveland Browns in the early 1990’s which helped prepare him for his time at the helm in New England. Though there are many more, some of the coaches who would influence Belichick over his first 25 years in the NFL are coaches Rick Forzano, Tommy Hudspeth, Ted Marchibroda, Red Miller, Ray Perkins, and notably, Bill Parcells. Belichick’s football knowledge and passion for winning has grown for many years, and many different coaches have helped build his knowledge of the game, giving him the edge he has today as the most veteran coach in the NFL, alongside Jeff Fisher of the L.A. Rams (22 years of head coaching experience in the NFL) (“Pro Football Reference”). However, to credit Belichick’s success to experience would be wrong. While he does have much more experience than most NFL coaches, if experience were the deciding factor of success, Jeff Fisher would also be incredibly successful, which is not the case. Jeff Fisher has been coach of the St. Louis/Los Angeles Rams for the last 5 season (as well as coach of the Oilers/Titans for 17 years prior), in which time he has compile a 31-41-1 record (2012-2016). This winning percentage of 0.432 in Fisher’s first 5 seasons with the Rams is abysmal in comparison with Belichick’s winning percentage in his first 5 seasons with the Patriots (2000-2004)

of 0.663. With experience out of the equation, we can address the differentiating factors which have made Belichick such a successful leader in the NFL.

### **Personality and Attitude**

As was discussed earlier, there are many personal dimensions which have set coaches apart throughout the NFL's history, yet every coach had his own strengths. Bill Belichick has never been the most "likeable" guy in the NFL, however, his players trust him as much as any player can trust a coach. He's known by many different nicknames, like Genius, Beli-cheat, or even just 'Asshole' by some of his friends (Fleming), each of these speaking to the varying opinions many football fans hold. Though Belichick was not athletic enough to pursue a career in football, from a young age he devoured football film and playbooks and all the nuances of the sport which have developed him to become the "genius" of a coach he is today (Fleming). Yet just as Belichick's knowledge of the game grew, so did Belichick's personality and attitude towards the game and towards coaching.

By watching the NFL Network Film *Bill Belichick: A Football Life*, I was able to understand Belichick's personality as a whole, rather than simply what most people see on the sideline and in interviews with the media, when Belichick might not be the most likeable guy. Early on in the documentary you can see that Belichick is a much more relaxed person than his opponents make him out to be. His extreme preparation for every situation and knowledge of what it takes to lead a team to success allow him the ability to have fun around his team. The first descriptor that comes to mind when you watch Bill Belichick around the Patriots is consistent. Belichick is consistent and predictable. His

players always know that he's going to demand perfection, criticize mistakes, and celebrate successes. More than anything, Belichick is constantly pushing his team to be more competitive than it already is.

Several examples stick out in the documentary which speak to the type of personality Belichick has. During a 2009 preseason game, Julian Edelman ran a punt return back for a touchdown. Wes Welker was nursing a minor injury on the sideline; otherwise, Welker would have been the one returning the punt. Right after the play, Belichick walked over to Welker, and asked him if he knew who Wally Pip was. Welker doesn't know, and Belichick tells him that he was the starting first baseman who lost his job to Lou Gehrig, who went on to be one of the greatest baseball players of all time. In other words, Belichick was reminding Welker that if he didn't elevate his play, Julian Edelman would replace him as the starter. Welker was the NFL's leader by receptions just the year before in 2007, as well as a Pro Bowl player. Julian Edelman was a rookie, 7<sup>th</sup> round draft pick who had nothing to lose. This is the kind of manipulation Belichick used, with his dry sense of humor, to crack a joke with a star player, while reminding that player that his job was never guaranteed. Everyone on the Patriots roster has to prove themselves, and compete for their jobs on a regular basis.

We also see in the documentary how Belichick is a very caring father, as he constantly mentors his son, teaching him a great deal about football. The type of person he is comes on display most when he is around his family. He's seen with his family at a barbeque after a game, laughing, smiling, and having a good time, just being a "regular guy". It's not only his family though, Belichick cares about his players a great deal too. However, Belichick's attitude about football and his desire to compete doesn't let him

show that side of his personality often. For example, when Wes Welker tore his ACL during the 2009 season, Belichick refused to answer questions about it with the media, even after being told that the fans wanted to hear how Welker was doing. Belichick said that Wes was a great player who would work hard to get better as soon as possible. When pressed to say more about Welker and the injury, Belichick said “We’re done talking about that, we’re on to Baltimore now”. His mentality of “on to the next one” can often be criticized as cold and uncaring, however Belichick has never found success dwelling on the past, and has never allowed himself to be controlled by anything which would take his focus off of what is best for the team. Though he cared for Welker, and wanted him to be able to play, the reality of the situation is always something Belichick focuses on, and improving the players he has available is always going to be what Belichick prioritizes.

Personality and attitude are highly important factors when one is looking at the successes of football coaches. There are many reasons as to why this is, but possibly the most telling reason is that many coaches have grown up with similar influences and knowledge of the game, yet have all experienced different outcomes. This may seem obvious or expected, yet some would argue that every coach would be successful if they simply had the knowledge of the game which Belichick has. We know that even with much of the knowledge Belichick had, many coaches who spent years learning from Belichick have gone on to failed head coaching careers of their own. A few of these great football minds who seemed to simply have the wrong personality, temperament, or attitude for the job despite their knowledge of the game are coaches Romeo Crennel, Eric Mangini, and Charlie Weis (Frenz). By looking into personal accounts of people who



have known Belichick over the years, we can begin to understand the personal dimensions which differentiate Belichick from many others.

Based on case studies such as these, it seems appropriate to state that knowledge alone cannot bring a coach success in the NFL, or even in college coaching. Belichick has been a very similar person in in the NFL as a coach as he was in college as a student. According to Dick Miller, a former Economics professor of Belichick's at Wesleyan University, Belichick was the same "focused and intense" man in class that is seen on the sideline during NFL games (Fleming). Belichick's intensity has given him great amounts of authority in the Patriots organization. The way former college coach and friend of Belichick's, Mike Whalen, describes the control and authority in New England says a lot about Belichick's style. "You want to know what kind of influence and control he has over this franchise? Listen to his players. It's totally, exactly the same things Bill says...Same page. Same message. Same culture. When you get to a point when you hear your players talking and answering questions very similarly to the way you would answer, you know the philosophy is in place, they're all in..." (Fleming). Nick Venturi served under Belichick while he coached in Cleveland. Venturi remembers Belichick's players being in a state of "constant emotional discomfort", which is why Belichick's teams never have a "flat" game (Fleming). Belichick is a very observant person who never misses a beat on his football team, and because of this, he's always finding details upon which they can all improve. The discomfort that causes his players to stay "on edge" is created by this constant vigilance. Belichick is known for seeing a mistake happen during practice from across the football field, then running over to the player to tell them what they did wrong and how to fix it (Fleming).

Belichick's personality was one which always kept players on their toes. Former Patriots players like Matt Cassel, Don Jones, Heath Evans, Darius Butler and many more have spoken about "Q&A sessions" before practices with Belichick which were always detailed and thoroughly comprehensive of what the coach wanted his men to know. Belichick was always a perfectionist, and when he teaches specific techniques or assignments to his players, he expects them to remember their jobs perfectly. If a player did not learn the playbook, they could not play. Belichick made sure that everyone who played for him was diligent in their study of the game, to the point where, in an extreme case like that of Jamie Collins being traded this year, he would remove them from the team if they refused to study their assignments. This desire for perfection is what drove many of the players on his team to become great at what they did. Nose-tackle Vince Wilfork recalled his time with Belichick as frustrating at times, yet rewarding. Wilfork had never played in a 34 defense prior to his 10 seasons with the Patriots under Belichick, yet he recalls how the coach would work with him every day until he understood his assignment. Even when Wilfork was "pissed off" at his coach, Belichick "never took his foot off the gas pedal" (Fleming).

Belichick's non-stop passion for perfection on the football field is similar to that of another all-time great NFL coach, Vince Lombardi. Lombardi, before one of his first Packers' training camps told his men, "You can stay here and pay the price for winning, or you can get the hell out" (Adler 47). This attitude may seem harsh, however it's one which the most successful coaches in NFL history have had, and it has guided their teams toward winning championships. Despite this "win or go home" mentality, Belichick has never been much of a "fly off the handle and yell and scream at people" person, as Phil

Savage recalls (Fleming). Belichick's consistent attitude allowed him to control himself in every situation, whether he was incredibly angry or happy, he was in control. This does not mean that Belichick never shows emotion around his players. During practices, Belichick can be seen yelling at Tom Brady for throwing an interception, demanding that Brady improve, threatening to "get a quarterback from Foxborough High" who could play better than Brady could (Fleming). Though it may seem like Belichick harshly berating Brady for his mistake, it is more so that Belichick cares so much about the success of the team that it's his responsibility to remind players that mistakes are unacceptable. Making fun of a player is part of his personality which can take the shape of insult, but it comes from Belichick's desire for that player being insulted to become greater than he already is. Belichick is an extremely tough coach, who's refusal to let mistakes by any player in his program go unnoticed allows him to constantly improve his team.

As a player, it can be very hard to play for a coach who is constantly criticizing the most minute mistakes you make every time you're "at work". With a personality as rough and ruthless as Belichick's, one might think that players would lose respect for the man and leave New England to play for a coach who treats them more nicely. The reason his players don't leave, in part, is because Belichick is truly a selfless coach. Belichick only cares about winning, and it shows most when the team doesn't achieve its Super Bowl championship goal. After the 2007 season ended with the Patriots losing the Giants in the Super Bowl, Belichick addressed his team in the locker room. Belichick delivered a heartfelt apology to his team, coaching staff, and everyone else involved in the Patriots season for letting them down. His involvement in "Spygate" that year was definitely a

distraction for which Belichick felt (and was) personally responsible. Offensive linemen Heath Evans recalls how much he respected Belichick, especially after what he said to the team in that locker room. In an interview with ESPN, Evans talked about how everyone thinks Belichick is “so arrogant and so self-centered”, but how he’s actually “the exact opposite” of that (Fleming). Because he’s very short at times with the media, especially after a loss, people have come to the conclusion that Belichick is arrogant. Belichick is so motivated to win that he is sincerely disappointed in himself after losses, regularly stating that he was “outcoached” (Fleming). By taking responsibility for the negative outcomes of games, Belichick gives himself the right to criticize his players as much as he wants. The players on the Patriots team are not blamed for losses; win or lose, Belichick will critique his players the same way, which is significantly more than most football coaches. It can be tempting for a coach to let his players off easy when they win a big game. It’s much less work for the coaching staff to move on from a game that they won without finding all the little mistakes their players made. The extra effort to find flaws even in victory are another reason why Belichick’s personality seems so pessimistic or highly critical. The determination he has to win overwhelms any desires he may have to cut corners or let his players get away with making mistakes.

### **The System**

The philosophy behind the Belichick system in New England strongly resembles the same philosophy which legendary coach Paul Brown put into place in Cleveland around the time Belichick was born. Brown’s philosophy was that the good of the team must be the driving force behind every decision everyone within the organization made.

Brown felt strongly that the best teams were made up of high quality people who possessed attributes of intelligence, character and diligence (Adler 37). Brown's teams bought into the philosophy that a group of outstanding individuals could never outperform a team that worked in perfect unison and execution with one another towards the same goals. It is Brown's philosophy which Belichick adopted in New England and with it has found great success. Part of Belichick's system has also involved aspects of Lombardi's attitude, which was, "I don't build character...I eliminate the people who don't have it" (Adler 48). By combining the philosophies of great coaches before him, along with his own extensive knowledge of what it takes to build a dominant football team, Belichick has created a system that works better than almost any before.

Belichick's total control over how people act in New England has allowed him to run his team like a well-oiled machine. "Seamless" is a word Belichick uses when asked about how he wants execution on the field to be. In a recent interview, Belichick told reporters that 'you sometimes can't even tell who's in at quarterback', in response to a question about Tom Brady, the NFL's leading quarterback this year by quarterback rating (125.5) (Daniels). Backup quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo played in 5 quarters at the start of this 2016 season while Brady sat out his 4-game suspension. Belichick said in the interview that Garoppolo is completely capable and qualified to play quarterback in New England, and that the transition between Garoppolo and Brady is basically seamless (Daniels). There are few other teams in the league who could win a game if their star quarterback of 15 years was unable to play. Studying the Patriots performance when Tom Brady is or is not playing is an excellent way of testing Belichick's system to see whether it really is as seamless as he claims.

When evaluating Bill Belichick, it seems almost more true than ever that he can win with or without any number of players, including Tom Brady. The two main examples which come to mind are the Patriots 2008 season (record of 11-5) and the first 4 games of the 2016 season (record 3-1) in which Tom Brady was not playing. In 2008, Brady tore his ACL during the 1<sup>st</sup> game of the season, and lifelong backup quarterback Matt Cassel took over for the remainder of the 16-week season. The Patriots went on to have a record of 11-5, yet did not make the playoffs (the Patriots were the first team since 1990 to not make the playoffs with an 11-win season). To put this season into perspective, the 2011 Indianapolis Colts lost their star quarterback Peyton Manning before the season started because of Manning needing neck surgery. The Colts went 2-14 that season without Manning, after a 10-6 record just the year before. It is more common for NFL teams to experience a season such as the Colts' in 2011 than that of the Patriots in 2008 after losing a future Hall of Fame quarterback. In 2016, Belichick's Patriots played without a suspended Tom Brady for the first 4 weeks, losing only once before Brady returned to action on the field ("Pro Football Reference"). Bill Belichick has shown that he is successful no matter the circumstance, just as Adler says all great coaches are.

The reason Belichick is able to win with so many different players entering and exiting the lineup, is that Belichick has created an unlimited number of systems within his general system. What this means is that in order to play for the Patriots, you must subject yourself to the hard work and sacrifice for the team which Belichick expects out of you every single day. Once a player is in this system, Belichick will create whatever football scheme necessary to make the players he has thrive. A perfect example of this is the 2016 matchup between the Patriots and Texans. Because Tom Brady was suspended,

and backup Jimmy Garoppolo was hurt, rookie Jacoby Brissett was the Patriots' starting quarterback (Cox). In the game, Brissett ran 27 yards for a touchdown on a naked bootleg play, making Brissett the first Patriots quarterback since 1976 to have a rushing touchdown from that far out (Cox). Not only that, but the Patriots do not run the naked bootleg with Tom Brady. Brady's strength as a quarterback is in the pocket, picking defenses apart from the protection of New England's high-quality offensive line. Most coaches would "play it safe", and have the 3<sup>rd</sup> string quarterback run mostly plays that the team is comfortable with, which are typically plays that the backup quarterbacks have practiced the most. However, Belichick and McDaniels (Patriots offensive coordinator) know that they put enough pressure on their players in practice that they can expect a 3<sup>rd</sup> string quarterback on their team to perform at a very high level.

When looking at the other greatest dynasty of the Super Bowl era, Chuck Noll's Steelers, one would expect Noll to have implemented a similar system to Belichick's. Chuck Noll's Steelers won the Super Bowl in 1974, 1975, 1978, and 1979. A system like Belichick's wouldn't be surprising to find in Pittsburgh, in order for Noll to put together a string of 4 championships over 6 years. Belichick's 4 Super Bowl wins have come over the span of 14 years. Noll's Steelers were a very average team during the 1980's, all the way until Noll's retirement in 1991 (McCaskey 267-269). No one can take away from what Chuck Noll was able to accomplish in the 1970's, which is something which may never happen again. Noll's success came because Noll was an incredible coach, and because he surrounded himself with great players and coaches. Belichick has been able to maintain a much longer, sustained success because of the way his system works. Part of the reason why the Steelers lost their dominance in the NFL is because the star players,

around whom Noll developed his team, began retiring from the sport or leaving the team.

The 11 Pittsburgh Steelers players in the chart below are Pro-Bowl players who retired from football between 1980 and 1984.

1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Dwight White	Joe Greene	Lynn Swan	Mel Blount	Franco Harris
	LC Greenwood	Jack Ham	Terry Bradshaw	Jack Lambert
	Glen Edwards			
	Mike Wagner			

When these players retired, Noll's team fell apart. After multiple losing seasons, Noll retired in 1991 (McCaskey 266-267). What Belichick's system has created is a team that wins, year after year, regardless of the players that come and go.

### **Coach-Quarterback Relationship**

While Belichick has found success without Tom Brady during his career, it would be naïve to believe that there isn't something special about the relationship Belichick and Brady have. The pair has been working together since Belichick drafted Brady as the 199<sup>th</sup> pick in the 2000 NFL Draft. Initially Brady was a backup for Drew Bledsoe, but Bledsoe became sidelined with an injury during the 2001 season, and Belichick stuck with Brady from that point on. Belichick "likes Brady's leadership qualities, his knowledge of the playbook, his practice habits, and most everything else about him" (McCaskey 360). Brady bought into the Belichick philosophy and system and has become almost an extension of Belichick. When Brady was asked about Belichick's



comments that the transition from Brady to Garoppolo is “seamless”, Brady was not surprised at all (Daniels). In fact, Brady emphasized Belichick’s point, saying that he expects the backup quarterbacks to practice and prepare themselves as if they were the starting quarterback. Because of the relationship that they have been able to create together, Belichick doesn’t have any issues with his “star” player like other teams do. Though Brady makes over \$20 million dollars a year at quarterback, and Belichick makes about \$7.5 million a year, Brady leads the Patriots team to do everything Belichick preaches (“Pro Football Reference”). Brady’s leadership is part of what gives Belichick so much power among the New England players. The media plays a huge role in the way players’ views of their coach can sway while they’re not together as a team. One way Brady socializes players to follow Belichick’s lead is by being an example to follow when speaking with the media. When a player as successful, famous, and influential as Tom Brady is telling the media that if everyone does their job, the team will be successful, Belichick’s philosophy thrives. Having a quarterback who supports his head coach’s decisions as much as Brady supports and works with Belichick is priceless. In the NFL, money speaks, and players who make a lot of money tend to do a lot of talking. Having Brady in his pocket has given Belichick control over each player in a way that most coaches do not. Quarterback-coach tandems have always been a large part of success within football programs.

Because the quarterback directs all plays on offense, quarterback play is a huge difference maker for teams. When a great quarterback is paired with an exceptional coach, those pairs tend to win a lot of games. A few examples from Adler’s book *Coaching Matters* are Sammy Baugh and Ray Flaherty, Otto Graham and Paul Brown,

Bart Starr and Vince Lombardi, Roger Staubach and Tom Landry, Fran Tarkenton and Bud Grant, Bob Griese and Don Shula, Terry Bradshaw and Chuck Noll, Joe Montana and Bill Walsh, Jim Kelly and Marv Levy, Phil Simms and Bill Parcells, and John Elway and Mike Shanahan (332). All of these players and coaches worked together to create more success than they would have apart. Skeptics say that some coaches are only considered great because their quarterbacks won them a lot of games. This is historically disproven, however, if one simply looks at the performance of the team with the star quarterback and without (Adler 334-336). In almost every case including that of Belichick and Brady, coaches have found success with other players as much as with the named quarterback. The relationship between Brady and Belichick seems to go beyond that of any tandem in NFL history. Despite the fact that many regard Belichick as a football genius, he has gained enough respect for Brady that he regularly asks for and uses Brady's advice on what to do in game plans (*A Football Life: Bill Belichick*). In the NFL network documentary series, Brady and Belichick sit in an office talking about the best ways to run a certain play against Ed Reed and the Baltimore Ravens. The amount of respect that can be seen throughout the film between the two men is something very special, and makes their relationship something that differentiates Belichick as a head coach from the rest of the coaches in the NFL.

When it comes down to it, Bill Belichick's personality and attitude, football system, and relationship with Brady have allowed him to unleash the full potential of his schematic football knowledge. Many coaches are gifted with great amounts of football knowledge, but are never able to realize that potential on the field because they are lacking in one of these categories which Belichick has mastered. Belichick is the only

coach in the last few decades to have truly historic amounts of success, and the full measure of his success is still yet to be known.

## **Conclusion**

Evaluating the effectiveness of NFL coaches can be very difficult because they are simply one person out of hundreds who are involved in each NFL team's franchise. By evaluating a great number of NFL coaches throughout history, Adler was able to create a reasonable argument that despite the head coach's surroundings, the head coach is the most consequential player in the grand scheme of a team's success or failure. Adler was able to do this through intensive research on 10 coaches whom he recognized as the best of all time. This list did not include Bill Belichick, since it was written in 2003, at which time Belichick had only been at the helm of New England for 3 seasons. Within the list of Adler's 10 selected coaches though, he identified ownership, players, and luck as the most common claims against the head coach as being the team's main reason for success. In each of the 10 coaches' cases, Adler was able to find examples of situations in which each coach was able to win games with his team without either the ownership or players that critics were claiming were more responsible for the team's success. If this is true, the 32 head coaches in the NFL have much more power in this multi-billion-dollar entertainment industry than they realize.

One coach who absolutely knows the amount of impact he has on the success or failure of his team is Bill Belichick. As a student of the game, Belichick knows what coaches before him have had to do to achieve greatness and he does not hesitate to put in

the work that it takes. As he has done for his team for many years, Belichick has put himself in the best position to be successful as a head coach.

Belichick constantly talks about how he does everything he can to put his team in the best position to win games. In this exact manner, Belichick's life seems as though it were a strategic plan to set so that he would be in an advantageous position at some point in his life to be a great head coach in the NFL. Through his many years studying the game with his father, to his many duties as an assistant on different NFL teams, Belichick was always learning. He learned about how to put together a team and earn their respect. Both of these tools would be incredibly helpful in Belichick's time with New England.

When looking at Bill Belichick from a distance, it's easy to say that he is just a good coach who has been in the right situation to win a lot of football games. When he's studied on a much more detailed level however, it becomes very clear that Belichick is intrinsically motivated to be more successful than almost anyone around him. He spends as little time in the spotlight as he can. He keeps his Super Bowl rings "in a box somewhere", and dismisses them anytime a reporter asks him about them ("A Football Life: Bill Belichick"). This casual dismissal of the rings, which are symbols of greatness in the NFL, shows that Belichick isn't the type of person who is willing to allow complacency into his life. The only Super Bowl ring he wants is the next one. Whenever he is asked about a decision he made for the team, his answer is that he did what he thought would give his team the best chance to win the game. When he's working, his entire focus is on what he can do to make his team better and win the next game. Though he cares about his players and assistant coaches, he will never allow them to come between his team and a win. Players learn early on with Belichick that he expects 100%

effort, all the time if you hope to play for him. Even though Belichick's story seems very convincing, some doubt just how much Belichick contributes to the Patriots' success over the last 16 seasons.

It can be argued that Belichick has been at an advantage at the helm of the Patriots over the years with Tom Brady as his quarterback. However, Belichick has had the ability to produce winning records in 2008 (11-5) and 2016 without his star quarterback. This is something that "good" NFL coaches have not been able to achieve. Belichick's system in New England has been proven to work, and Belichick's confidence in it is unfailing. There are few (if any) coaches in the NFL today who would trade away one of their top players (Jamie Collins, LB) in the middle of the season when their team holds the best record (7-1) in the NFL, as Belichick did just weeks ago. Belichick is respected a great deal by his players. He makes his agenda of "team first, no matter what" abundantly clear. When Collins was traded, the rest of the Patriots moved on and continued to work toward the team's goal of a championship. Because Belichick has never faltered in the way he leads his team, his behavior is as predictable from a coach as any player can ask.

Overall, the personal and tactical dimensions that differentiate Belichick have defined many other coaches throughout NFL history. The difference in many cases in which a head coach was unsuccessful can be found in the details more often than not. Coaches must have both the football knowledge and the ability to teach their players how to execute on the field, otherwise their football tactics and scheme are worthless. In the same way, a coach may care about his players a great deal, but if they don't have respect for that coach, the relationships needed to build a championship team will never be formed. The successful coaches have pieced together all the components needed to have

the personal attributes and tactical knowledge and creativity to win games consistently, regardless of the situations which surround them.

Bill Belichick is the most successful coach in the NFL today for several reasons. Leader-member exchange between Belichick and his players is higher than anywhere else because of the respect Belichick has earned from his player more than anything else. He may not always be liked, but his players understand what is expected of them and they respond positively to Belichick's expectations with higher performance on the field. Another reason Belichick's teams are so successful is that his players mimic the behaviors which he role models. Because his players respect him and the success he's made for himself, they embrace his messages of "do your job" and "team first" and it shows when Patriots players are interviewed after games, as was seen previously in an example of Tom Brady's responses closely matching Belichick's responses to questions about the team in separate media interviews. The last, and possibly most intriguing reason for Belichick's success is that he has managed to take vast stores of football knowledge and apply the information he needs at will to adjust the system he's made in New England so as to best suit the players who are available to him. By confidently and consistently using his system, Belichick has maximized the potential of each player on his roster. This system is not one in which a new player is plugged into a vacated spot and is expected to perform the exact same tasks. Though the system is structured, Belichick will adjust his offensive or defensive scheme to best fit the players he has available, never putting his men at a disadvantage he could foresee on the field. The other half of the puzzle which Belichick does better than anyone, is use his own system and its strengths in whichever way he feels takes away the opposing team's strengths.

Understanding why Belichick is so successful cannot be pinpointed to any specific practice or technique. If one of the reasons for Belichick's success is taken away, he would not have found near the amount of success he has today. Because of the competition level and amount of money on the line in the NFL, a head coach cannot expect to last long without mastering his own formula for success. Because of the complexity of the NFL and the differences in every team from year to year, it is impossible to say what factors are exact causes for a coach's success. In the future, if an NFL owner wanted to be in a better position to hire the best coach possible for his team's success, it would be wise for that owner to invest in this research.

Among the collection of all-time great coaches, there have been several common behavioral aspects which repeatedly show up throughout history. Each of the successful coaches studied was organized in the way they went about hard work. These coaches push their players to the limit to make them better, but never without a greater lesson being involved in the training. Each of these great coaches has hundreds of short term goals that, if accomplished, lead their team to perform at the highest possible level. Along with high levels of organizational abilities, these coaches were all gifted communicators. This is not to say that their public speaking skills were exceptional, but rather that when they communicate with the players, coaches, and others around them, the message gets across. As would be expected, each greatly successful head coach was blessed with not only the ability to understand a great deal about football, but also the ability to recognize his own weaknesses in the area of football knowledge. The great coaches knew what people to surround themselves with so as to fill any gaps in their own football knowledge. Humility is necessary for this, and present in each great NFL coach. For many of the

great coaches, this humility came from a place of complete confidence. The great coaches knew what they were doing, how to do it, and that maintaining a humble persona would be beneficial to the relationships they would have with their players.

Interestingly, integrity does not always show up in the category of commonalities of the great head coaches of NFL history. Though they all seem to be “good” people, probably half of them repeatedly engaged in actions which some would consider questionable. Bending the rules, or even cheating, is something that most of the best NFL coaches have been accused of during their careers. It’s very common for great coaches to find out where the line is, in terms of certain NFL rules, and getting as close as possible to crossing that line. Bill Belichick is the perfect example of a great coach today who likes to bend the rules whenever he gets the chance.

Another interesting inconsistency between great head coaches lies in their backgrounds. Though all of them have had extensive learning experiences as assistants in the NFL, or head coaches in high school or college football, not all coaches have actually been successful football players. Of today’s 32 NFL coaches, the best 5 are, arguably, Bill Belichick, Pete Carroll, Mike McCarthy, Mike Tomlin, and John Harbaugh. None of these coaches actually played football in the NFL (Seifert). In fact, in the last 20 years, few great coaches were great players. More today than in the past, there seems to be little correlation between ability to play in the NFL and being able to coach in the NFL.

The next great coach of the NFL may be a current coach that simply hasn’t had enough time to show his coaching greatness. 13 head coaches are in their 1<sup>st</sup> or second season with their specific team this year. The most successful of these 13 coaches are Gary Kubiak (Denver Broncos), Jack Del Rio (Oakland Raiders), and Ben McAdoo (New



York Giants). Throughout history, several great coaches began their careers by turning around teams that were notoriously poor for 10 or more seasons. Vince Lombardi (Green Bay Packers), Paul Brown (Cleveland Browns) and Bill Walsh (San Francisco 49ers) have each turned around failing teams. Jack Del Rio's Oakland Raiders have the potential of becoming the next poor team to run around if they continue the success they've found in 2016. Del Rio's commitment to bringing success back to Oakland has been fruitful during this 2016 season. In an interview with TV show host, Colin Cowherd, Del Rio talks about how much he has improved as a coach and how he understands players in a better way than he ever has, and how's that's helped him become a better coach. Along with McAdoo and Kubiak, I believe Del Rio has the highest potential of any coaches today to become the next great coach.

Within the field of studying NFL coaches, future research could involve psychological testing of NFL players and coaches to better understand their relationships. For example, future research on player-coach relationships could be done in the area of predictability of actions. Though it has never been researched at length, consistency of a coach's action could have a great deal to do with the trust players have for their coaches. This paper provides context for future research that hopes to uncover what causes success in the NFL, or even sports in general.

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## Appendix: History Behind the 10 NFL Coaches with 3 or More Championships

**HALAS**

George Halas, also known as “Papa Bear”, is considered one of the fathers of professional football. He co-founded the American Professional Football Association (APFA) in 1920. The APFA would become the National Football League (NFL) in 1922 (Stone). Originally hired to Coach the Decatur Staleys, Halas would end up moving the team to Chicago and naming them the Bears out of respect for the Chicago Cubs baseball team who allowed Halas to share Wrigley Field for a home stadium (Stone). Halas coached the Bears until 1928, when he changed positions to co-owner. He became the sole owner of the Bears in 1932, and resumed his head coaching job in 1933. When World War II began Halas enlisted in the Navy (Stone). Halas returned to coaching in 1946 upon his return, and would do so until 1955. After taking a few years off, Halas would again return to coach the Bears from 1958 until 1967 (Stone). Halas would finish his time with the Bears having coached 40 seasons and been an owner for 8 (McCaskey 48). Halas was voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1963, finishing his professional coaching career with a win-loss-tie record of 324-151-31 (McCaskey 48). The 324 wins which Halas captured over his 40 seasons would remain a record for most wins as a head coach in the NFL for 27 years until it was broken by Don Shula in 1993 (Stone). Halas won a total of 6 championships, in 1921, 1933, 1940, 1941, 1946, and 1963 (McCaskey 387-388).

*“He’s the founder of the National Football League, no matter how you look at it. Guys like George Halas and Art Rooney and Tim Mara, they started out and persevered... You don’t have a game of football if you don’t have those pioneers. There were a lot of lean years.”*

*– Mike Ditka (Former Bears tight end, coach and Hall of Famer)*

**LAMBEAU**

Earl Louis “Curly” Lambeau was a player/coach in the NFL for the Green Bay Packers. Being a player coach was fairly common in the NFL’s early years, as football at the professional level had not yet gained significant attention. Lambeau was the Packers head coach for 29 seasons, the first nine of which he was also a player (Stone). Lambeau was there from the start for the Packers in 1921 who were accepted as an NFL franchise after being financed by Acme Packing Company (McCaskey 86). Lambeau and Halas are in a large part responsible for the intense rivalry between the Bears and the Packers. These were two of three teams to survive the transition into organized professional football, and the two coaches had a personal rivalry that fueled their desire to win in the NFL that much more (McCaskey 90). Lambeau was the coach in Green Bay from 1921 to 1949. Following his resignation as coach of the Packers before the 1950 season, Lambeau coached the Chicago Cardinals in 1950 and 1951, and the Washington Redskins in 1951 (McCaskey 89-104). Lambeau won a total of 6 NFL championships during his head coaching career, all with the Packers, in 1929, 1930, 1931, 1936, 1939, and 1944 (McCaskey 387). Alongside Halas, Lambeau was a member of the inaugural 1963 Pro Football Hall of Fame class (Stone). Lambeau passed away after a heart attack in 1965 at the age of 67, and the Packers stadium would soon after be renamed in his honor (Stone).

*“Curly Lambeau's knowledge of the game helped make him great, but he also knew exactly what he wanted. He was as strict as they come. He wanted things done a certain way. He wanted you to be on time for everything. And he didn't want you out carousing in the evenings.”*

Ken Kranz (*Former Green Bay Packers Player*)



**BROWN**

Paul Brown originally coached high school football following his graduation from Miami University, at which time he was also a history and English teacher (McCaskey 115-116). Nicknamed the “professor”, Brown never did stop teaching, he simply transitioned to teaching football to professional athletes. After amassing an 80-8-2 record as a high school head coach in Ohio over the course of 9 years, Brown would take the head coaching position at Ohio State University, and in 1944 a coaching position for the Great Lakes Naval Station (McCaskey 117-119). Following his military service during WWII at Great Lakes, Brown was signed on as the head coach of a brand new Cleveland Browns professional football team in 1946 (McCaskey 121). The Browns, under the leadership of Paul Brown, quickly rose within the ranks of professional football. Brown was the head coach in Cleveland from 1942 to 1962 (Stone). Even though Brown’s record in Cleveland totaled 53-30-3, Brown was fired and moved to La Jolla in southern California with his wife to settle down (McCaskey 145). Brown however couldn’t stay away from football very long, and soon expressed his desire to start a new NFL franchise with some friends and colleagues (McCaskey 146). Through the mayhem which was the NFL-AFL merger in the 1960’s Brown managed to find himself as the head coach of the 1968 Cincinnati Bengals team (McCaskey 146-147). Brown coached the Bengals until 1975, at which point he began to focus his efforts on front office work with the franchise (McCaskey 151). Brown would retire with an NFL head coaching record of 222-108-9. Brown continued to work with the Bengals front office until 1991 when he passed away (McCaskey 152). He would be inducted into the NFL’s Hall of Fame in 1967. Brown’s 3

championships all came while he was coaching the Cleveland Browns in 1950, 1954, and 1955 (McCaskey 391).

*“I was brought up on Paul Brown football. I played college ball at John Carroll, a small school outside Cleveland. I think our coach, Herb Eisele, went to every clinic that Paul Brown ever had... When I was drafted by the Browns, it was just a continuation of the same Paul Brown system, just a lot more sophisticated. Then I got traded to the Baltimore Colts, and the coach there, Weeb Ewbank, was a Brown guy, too. My 33 years [as an NFL head coach], that was pretty much from the Paul Brown playbook. Chuck Noll, same thing. He took it and did some pretty good things in Pittsburgh, won four Super Bowls.*

*To be a successful head coach, you have to have a lot of self-confidence, you have to believe in yourself. And be able to teach. You could have all the skill and knowledge that there is about that game, but if you can't transmit it to the people you're responsible for, it's not doing you any good.”*

*-Don Shula (Former Browns defensive back and Hall of Fame coach)*

## **EWBANK**

Wilbur Charles “Weeb” Ewbank was another NFL coach who began his career at the high school level. After playing football at Miami University in Ohio (the “Cradle of Coaches”), Ewbank spent 13 years teaching and coaching high school football (McCaskey 165). When WWII began, Ewbank enlisted in the Navy, only to be assigned to the Great Lakes Naval Station and named assistant football coach to Paul Brown. Ewbank and Brown became friends at Great Lakes and would eventually work together in professional football as well. Ewbank’s professional coaching career began as the line coach for Paul Brown’s Cleveland Browns team in 1949, where he would remain until 1953 (McCaskey 167). After his very successful stint with the Browns, Ewbank moved on to take the head coaching job for the newly re-franchised Baltimore Colts for the 1954 season (McCaskey 168). From there he coached the Colts through the 1962 season, when he was fired and quickly hired to jumpstart the New York Jets franchise in 1963

(McCaskey 177-182). Ewbank remained the head coach for the Jets through the 1973 season, at which time he decided to step down from his position (McCaskey 190).

Ewbank retired and moved to Oxford, Ohio with his wife where he resided until his death in 1998 at age 91 (McCaskey 191). He finished his professional coaching career with a win-loss-tie record of 134-130-7, having won 3 professional football championships, one of those being a Super Bowl win. The championships came in 1958 and 1959 with the Baltimore Colts in the AFL, and in 1968 with the New York Jets in the NFL at Super Bowl III. Weeb Ewbank was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1978 (McCaskey 193-195).

## **LOMBARDI**

Vincent Lombardi played college football at Fordham University before beginning his coaching career first as a high school coach, and a few years later as an assistant coach at Fordham (McCaskey 203-204). Following the 1948 season at Fordham, Lombardi accepted an assistant coaching position at the US Military Academy at West Point, where he would develop a great amount of his coaching knowledge from legendary West Point coach, Colonel Red Blaik. Working with Col. Blaik for the next 5 years helps Lombardi establish much of his coaching style for his later years with the Packers (McCaskey 204). Following West Point Lombardi was hired by the New York Giants as offensive coach. Also hired at the time was Tom Landry, who coordinated the defense, and would go on to become one of the NFL's great coaches as well. Lombardi learned a great deal about defense from Landry in his 5 years in New York (McCaskey 204). In 1959, Lombardi's final season with the Giants, the Green Bay Packers held a record of 1-10-1, and were desperately in need of a new head coach to push the franchise in the right

direction. Lombardi would only stand as head coach the Green Bay Packers for a relatively short amount of time, from the 1959 season through the end of the 1967 season (McCaskey 234-235). In those 9 season with the Packers, however, Lombardi was able to capture 5 NFL championships, including wins in both Super Bowl I and II. Lombardi's playoff percentage of .900 is still the highest of any coach in professional football, and he held an overall record of 105-35-6 during his head coaching career (Seed). His championships came in 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, and 1967, for a total of five, which is more championships than all but Lambeau and Halas (McCaskey 391). Lombardi tragically passed away in 1970 only months after being diagnosed with cancer (McCaskey 232). Vince Lombardi was posthumously inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1971 and in his honor, the winners of the Super Bowl every year receive the "Lombardi Trophy" (McCaskey 235).

*"His charisma, his manner was very, very impressive. One of the first things he said was, We're going to RELENTLESSLY pursue perfection -- even though we know full well that we won't catch it, because nothing is perfect. 'Put the relentlessly' in capital letters because that's how he said it."*

*-Bart Starr (Former Packers quarterback and Hall of Famer)*

## **SHULA**

Donald Francis "Don" Shula is the winningest coach in NFL history. His 347 career wins with the Baltimore Colts and Miami Dolphins is unmatched by any other coach, even when including the AAFL and pre-NFL merger teams (Stone). Shula's football player career started in high school, and he played on scholarship for John Carrol University in the Cleveland area. He was drafted to the NFL by the Browns, and would play for several years before retiring from playing football in 1957 (McKinney). During Shula's career he played for both Paul Brown and Weeb Ewbank, which would have an

influence on his upcoming coaching career (Stone). Shula left the NFL to assistant coach for University of Virginia, and later the University of Kentucky. Following a brief college coaching career Shula accepted the defensive coordinator position for the Detroit Lions, which he acted as for two seasons (McKinney). At the age of 33 in 1963, Shula replaced his former coach, Ewbank, as the head coach of the Baltimore Colts, where he would remain until 1970 (Stone). Shula spent the next 26 seasons with the Miami Dolphins, until 1995, by which time he had accumulated his historic number of wins. Shula's Super Bowl wins came in back-to-back seasons, 1972 and 1973. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1997 (Stone).

*"He was a guy on the rise and really hungry to win....And he was smart. We could tell he wanted to win and, very soon, we knew we were going to win. He said we're going to run a lot more and work hard -- which none of us minded."*

*-Bob Griese (Former Dolphins quarterback and Hall of Famer)*

## **NOLL**

Charles "Chuck" Noll did not take his time to make his way into NFL coaching. After playing careers at University of Dayton and in the NFL for Coach Paul Brown in Cleveland, Noll began coaching as an assistant for Sid Gillman for the LA/SD Chargers in 1960 (McCaskey 241). From 1966 to 1968 Noll would move to Baltimore to coach underneath Don Shula for the Colts. In 1969 Shula would recommend that the Pittsburgh Steelers hire Noll as their head coach (McCaskey 242). Noll remained in Pittsburgh for the next 23 seasons as head coach, winning Super Bowls in 1974, 1975, 1978, and 1979, turning the Steelers into an NFL dynasty (Seed). The Steelers "Steel Curtain" remains one of the most respected and feared defenses in football history (Seed). Noll retired from coaching in 1991, and lived a quiet retirement until his death in 2014 (Brown).

*"I don't see current coaches dealing with players the way he did. It's a different game now, and I see a lot of coaches getting caught up in the media with the way they deal with players. You see it on the sidelines. Chuck Noll was always consistent. You wouldn't see him give a high five if you made a great play or get in your face if you made a bad play. I guess that would make Chuck Noll a dinosaur now."*

*-Mel Blount (Former Steelers defensive back and Hall of Famer)*

## **WALSH**

William "Bill" Walsh was originally a boxer as well as football player in college at San Jose State (McCaskey 279). After college, Walsh coached high school swimming and football while obtaining his master's degree from San Jose State. Walsh then accepted assistant coaching positions at UC Berkeley and Stanford between the years of 1960 and 1965. Walsh's professional coaching career began with 2 seasons for the Oakland Raiders, 8 seasons for Paul Brown and the Cincinnati Bengals, and one season for the San Diego Chargers after having head coached a minor league football team called the San Jose Apaches in 1967 (McCaskey 281). Under the tutelage of Brown, Walsh learned a great deal about coaching that he would combine with his own creativity to develop his "genius" style of offensive play (McCaskey 282). Walsh took his offense from the NFL back to Stanford for 2 years where he would be successful as a head coach. In 1979 though, Walsh accepted the head coaching and general manager positions for the San Francisco 49ers (McCaskey 283). Walsh coached the 49ers through the Super Bowl XXIII victory in 1988, with his other Super Bowl wins coming in 1981 and 1984 (McCaskey 302). Walsh may have retired prematurely. The 49ers went on to win the Super Bowl in 1989 as well with essentially the exact team and system that Walsh had left behind (McCaskey 301). Walsh could only stay away from coaching for about 3 years, before he accepted the head coaching job at Stanford for a second time. He retired

from coaching completely in 1994, having been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame already, in 1993 (McCaskey 302-303). Bill Walsh continuously gave back to his community in many ways until his death in 2007 (McCaskey 303).

*“The thing about Bill Walsh is he had this certain swagger about him. I know they called him a genius for his play calling, but really it was the way he carried himself.”*

*-Jerry Rice (Former 49ers wide receiver and Hall of Famer)*

## **GIBBS**

Joe Gibbs played college football at San Diego State University under head coach Don Coryell. After college Gibbs would volunteer as an assistant coach for Coryell, before being offered the line coaching position there in 1966 (McCaskey 311). Because he was highly sought after as an assistant coach, Gibbs spent 1967 to 1972 assistant coaching for the Florida State Seminoles, then the USC Trojans, and lastly the Arkansas Razorbacks (McCaskey 312). His professional coaching career began in St. Louis, again under head coach Don Coryell until 1977. Gibbs then became the offensive coordinator for the Buccaneers in 1978, and shortly after the offensive coordinator in San Diego for none other than Coryell who had become the Chargers head coach that year (McCaskey 312). Gibbs time in San Diego would be cut short when he received an offer for the head coaching job of the Washington Redskins (McCaskey 313). Gibbs went on to coach the Redskins from 1981 to 1992 before his first retirement. Gibbs never lost his interest in football though, and when the opportunity came, Gibbs accepted a new head coaching contract, and would coach in Washington again from 2004 to 2007 (McCaskey 335-338). Joe Gibbs retired from coaching football for good after a playoff wild card game loss to the Seahawks in 2007 (McCaskey 340). His final record coaching the Redskins was 154-94-0. He led the Redskins to Super Bowl victories in 1982, 1987, and 1991. Gibbs was

inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1996 during his break from coaching in the NFL. Gibbs has, since his retirement from football, enjoyed a very successful and meaningful family life (McCaskey 341).

### **BELICHICK**

Bill Belichick was destined to be a football coach from a young age, as he was the son of Steve Belichick, a passionate assistant football coach who specialized in scouting talented football players (McCaskey 351). Bill Belichick was not handed anything, however. He graduated from Wesleyan University and promptly began his career in the NFL in 1975 as an assistant for the Baltimore Colts. Belichick showed incredible promise even as a first year assistant, and the next year took on a job with the Detroit Lions where he was a personal assistant to the head coach and spent countless hours meticulously breaking down film (McCaskey 354). The next year Belichick moved on to Denver, where he assisted on special teams and defense. From 1979 to 1990, Belichick would work for the New York Giants in various roles, eventually taking over the defensive coordinator position under head coach Bill Parcells (McCaskey 354). Following New York, Belichick accepted the head coaching position for the Cleveland Browns, where he would find some success from 1991 to 1995 (McCaskey 356). 1996 found Belichick having left his job in Cleveland for another assistant coaching position for Parcells, who was now in New England. Parcells then took the head coaching position for the NY Jets, and Belichick followed, serving as defensive coordinator there from 1997 to 1999. An awful 1999 Jets season caused Belichick to quit his job for the Jets, and was picked up by the Patriots as their new head coach (McCaskey 357). Belichick's Patriots have been a dominant force in the NFL since 2000, and in those 15 seasons they have won 4 Super



Bowls, in 2001, 2003, 2004, and 2015 (McCaskey 382-384). Unlike all other coaches included in this thesis, Bill Belichick is a current coach in the NFL, however it is all but certain that Belichick is a shoe-in for the Pro Football Hall of Fame as soon as he retires, which may still be several years away.

*“Demanding. I think that's the word that best describes it. He's not going to be your best friend. He is demanding of you every second that you are in that facility and partially when you're out of the facility also. He demands your concentration, your intelligence. Your physical being. Your effort. Everything that you can put into a football game, he demands it of you.”*

-Tedy Bruschi (*Former Patriots linebacker*)